

# “He Was Such a Block of Ice.” Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis of Adolescent Girls’ Work in an Intimate Relationship

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**Abstract:** The first romantic relationships of adolescents are of significant developmental importance, and the acquired experience is a cultural issue. The study aimed to capture what meanings young teenagers give their first love experiences. In-depth interviews were conducted with six teenage girls. A detailed idiographic analysis, based on Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), allowed us to present the work of adolescents to maintain intimacy and ensure the stability of a romantic relationship. It was noticed that young girls take an emotionally leading role in their romantic relationships, feel responsible for them, and act following the stereotypical gender order. The interpretative framework adolescents adopt may result from therapeutic and utilitarian narratives, addressed mainly to women.

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**The** considerations undertaken in the article aim to represent the meanings adolescents give to their experiences of being in a romantic relationship. Their starting point is the effects of analyses offered in the doctoral thesis (Kacprzak-Wachniew 2020). The analytical work carried out at that time showed that the romantic experiences of adolescents are combined with a complex of rules and norms referring to the cultural and social gender order (*gender*). Therefore, we revolve in the article around the assumptions of the interpretative and humanistic paradigm (see: Burell and Morgan 1979). While the first one allows for "understanding the subjective human experience by testing knowledge in the practice of specific communities" (Rubacha 2006:62 [trans. KKW, JSS]), the second one directs attention to the manifestations of inequality, power, and domination occurring in it (Humm 1993; Ryle 2012; Chołuj 2014, Czarnacka 2014; Cohen, Manion, and Morrison 2018). The combination of feminist theory with the assumptions of social constructivism led to the conclusion that the romantic experiences of adolescents are a cultural issue regulated by the axionormative structure of society (see: Giddens 1992; Hochschild 2003; Płonka-Syroka and Stacherzak 2008; Płonka-Syroka, Radziszewska, and Szlagowska 2008; Szlendak 2008; Foucault 2009; Gdula 2009; Stadnik and Wójtewicz 2009; Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2013; Bieńko 2017; Kalinowska 2018; Wróblewska-Skrzek 2022).

As a result, the article is divided into two main parts. In the theoretical one, we outline the cultural framework for adolescents' experiences of

love based on previous research results. In the empirical part, we represent adolescents' experiences in romantic relationships captured during research.

## **A Cultural Framework for Experiencing Romantic Love**

Experiencing love is not possible outside of culture. The emotions people experience are shaped by the norms, language, stereotypes, metaphors, and symbols in that culture. They constitute a framework where stimuli coming from the body, emerging emotions, and thoughts are organized, named, classified, and interpreted as love or the lack of it. Culture provides symbols, images, and stories where romantic feelings can be captured and communicated (Illouz 1997; Czernecka and Kalinowska 2020). Cultural notions of love sink deep into a person's mind, showing how to shape one's feelings. Ready-made narrative scripts are later used to give future episodes of life an appropriate structure (Illouz 2016). Young people have access to many areas where the idea of love is disseminated. These include fairy tales, series, advertisements, songs, and films (Werner 2012), as well as the Internet, where other people formulate guidelines on how interpersonal relationships should be created (Suzuki and Calzo 2004; Fliciak et al. 2010; Kim, Weinstein, and Selman 2017; Żurko 2018).

The connection of love with such phenomena as marriage and reproduction, sexuality and erotica, and sexual orientation and *gender* combines the issue of intimate relationships of young people with the contemporary contract of gender "organizing relations between women and men at the institutional, cultural, and individual level"

(Titkow 2014:250 [trans. KKW, JSS]; Fuszara 2002; Inglehart and Norris 2004). Culturally and socially (re)produced beliefs, patterns, and roles legitimize the *obviousness* of relationships between people and determine their attitudes and mutual expectations. They are also a source of ambiguous socialization messages, responsible for preparing individuals to play the role of a partner in an intimate relationship (see: Odegard 2021).

Despite the empirical changes observed in traditional definitions of femininity and masculinity, cultural models of representatives of both sexes are still a source of the unequal status of partners in an intimate relationship, a different distribution of rights and obligations assigned to them, and even experienced violence (Chybicka and Pastwa-Wojciechowska 2009; Chybicka and Kosakowska-Berezecka 2010; Borrajo, Gámez-Guadix, and Calvete 2015; Masanet, Medina-Bravo, and Ferrés 2018; Nava-Reyes et al. 2018; Cava et al. 2020; Ruiz-Palomino et al. 2021; Jiménez-Picón et al. 2022). The model of romantic love promoted in mass culture gives its recipients almost ready sets of beliefs about the *true face of love*. The myths, stereotypes, and cultural roles of gender occurring within them fuel the imagination of the recipients, thus equipping them with almost ready scenarios of loving and being loved (Cubells-Serra et al. 2021).

## Adolescent Love Relationships

Undertaking activities by young people, such as dating (in the real and virtual world) (e.g., Montgomery and Sorell 1998; Szarota 2011; Kacprzak-Wachniew and Leppert 2013), experimenting with one's sexuality (Durham 1999; Usher and Mooney-Somers 2000; Jankowiak and

Gulczyńska 2014; Sikora 2014; Jankowiak 2023), and establishing, sustaining, and participating in the breakdown of an intimate relationship, is the source of essential life experiences that play a crucial role in the process of forming identity (Erikson 1968; Havighurst 1972; Pindur 2002; Pawłowska 2006; Kacprzak-Wachniew 2015). *Love experimentation* determines the self-esteem and self-attractiveness of young people (Harter 1988; Furman and Szafter 2003; Luciano and Orth 2017), teaches coping with stress and intense emotions (Nieder and Seiffge-Krenke 2001), and is also a source of social status achieved both in the peer group and relationships with the family (McIsaac et al. 2008; Suleiman and Daerdorff 2015; Kaczuba and Zwadroń-Kuchciak 2020). Adolescents' belief in the possibility of experiencing a happy, full romantic excitement of love at first sight coexists with a relatively orderly, thoroughly thought-out vision of the expected relationship. However, the discrepancy observed by adolescents between the "expected" and the "actually experienced" relationship (Guzman et al. 2009) confirms that people of all ages enter into intimate relationships with the baggage of top-down beliefs, expectations, and values (see: Sternberg 2001; Wojciszke 2006; Collins, Welsh, and Furman 2009). Intimate relationships become a source of heterogeneous romantic experiences for adolescents, filling their teenage biographies with diverse cognitive, emotional, and behavioral phenomena with romantic content (Collins et al. 2009; Ruskiewicz 2013).

Therefore, there is a need to give voice to young people. Their experiences in romantic relationships have not been discussed in detail so far (Williams and Hickle 2010; Cheema and Malik 2021; Couture, Fernet, and Hébert 2021). Filling that gap

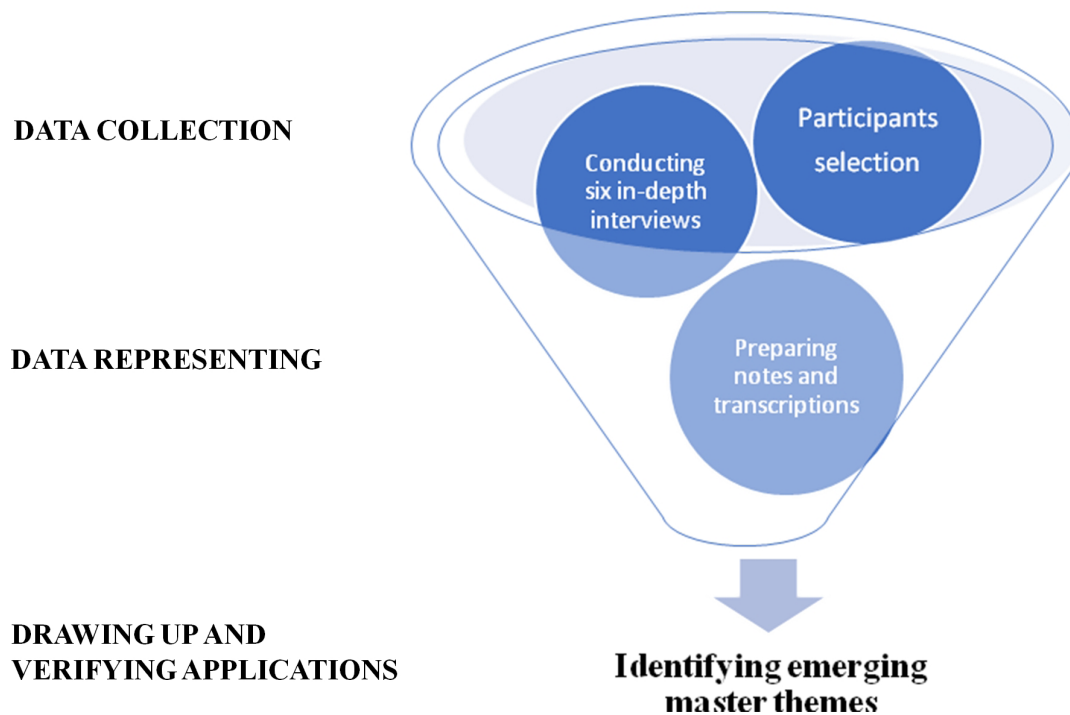
is salient because the first romantic relationships have significant developmental functions, and the accumulated experiences impact the psychosocial functioning of young people. To understand what adolescents experience, the framework of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) was adopted (Smith, Flowers, and Larkin 2009). The subject of IPA’s interest is the position of an individual—one’s dilemmas and problems or, more broadly, one’s coping in and with the world. As an approach that fits into the assumptions of the qualitative research strategy, IPA makes it possible to investigate how people give meaning to their meaningful life experiences. Thus, the study aimed at capturing adolescents’ experiences in romantic relationships.

The following main research question was: What meanings do adolescents give to their experience of being in romantic relationships?

## Research Design

The study’s methodological framework is determined by IPA. It refers to the basic methods of phenomenology, hermeneutics, and idiography. It is a method that is both descriptive (describes how things appear) and interpretive (things have their hidden meaning) (Smith et al. 2009). As part of that approach, the researcher emphasizes generating rich and detailed descriptions of how the studied entities experience the phenomena being analyzed. The research was conducted in three stages presented below.

Figure 1. Research stages



Source: Self-elaboration.

The data collection stage involved the need to develop criteria for including participants in the research and to settle a preliminary version of questions for an in-depth interview. The data representation began with transcribing the interviews and taking notes from their course. Such arrangement of data allowed the preparation of tables and analytical matrices, which were the starting point for proper data analysis. The phase of derivation and final verification of conclusions identified five themes emerging from the adolescents’ narratives. Their detailed description is presented later in the article.

### Participants Group

Purposive sampling was used to gain insight into how adolescents understand their first romantic experiences. Since psychological similarities and differences are usually analyzed within a uni-

form (homogeneous) group in IPA, it was vital to determine the features based on which the group was distinguishable. The selection of candidates for the research was subordinated to such a criterion as:

- gender (girls),
- experience of being in a romantic relationship (for at least three months in the past year),
- number and nature of experiences (no more than three, up to four heterosexual romantic relationships),
- moderate attitude toward religion,
- current marital status (being single),
- living with both parents.

Ultimately, two groups of three girls participated in the study. The characteristics of the research group were presented based on the length and number of existing emotional relationships (see: Table 1).

**Table 1. Characteristics of participants due to differentiating variables**

PARTICIPANT	AGE	SCHOOL	LAST RELATIONSHIP LENGTH	RELATIONSHIPS TO DATE
R1: MILENA	18	high school	about 2 years	1
R2: JUDYTA	18	high school	about 6 months	4
R3: NATALIA	17	high school	about 1 year (2-month break)	2
R4: MAGDA	15	middle school	about 5 months (break)	3
R5: ALICJA	15	middle school	about 2 years (4-month break)	2
R6: BEATA	16	middle school	about 2 years (2 breaks: 6 and 2 months)	2

Source: *Self-elaboration.*



## Data Collection

The data were collected through an in-depth interview conducted under one-on-one conditions. Its use seemed to be the most beneficial due to the subject and object of the study, that is, adolescents telling about personal experiences gained from a romantic relationship. To the guidelines for conducting IPA-style interviews, a plan for the interview was prepared, including the main questions and areas to which the meeting referred.

The prepared interview dispositions contained ten questions general and follow-up specific questions. For example, a general question was: How did you meet and start a relationship with your partner? The specific questions were: How did you meet your partner? How did it happen that you became a couple? What did you think about this person at the time?

An information brochure distributed in schools to students and their carers was a tool enabling the search for people for research. After obtaining their and their parents' consent, meetings with students were held in school conditions or the university room.

The meetings with the participants began with introducing themselves, discussing the purpose of the study, and ensuring their anonymity and voluntary participation. Each time, it was also reminded that the interview was recorded (audio), and the participant was asked for permission to record it to prepare a transcription.

The following request was addressed to the participants at the beginning of the interview: *I would like to ask you to tell me about your last relationship. I am cu-*

*rious about your experiences in a relationship, what you think about the relationship, the events that took place, and the person you were involved with.* Most often, it was necessary to ask an initiating question to get the participant to describe an episode or experience or to refer to what was already said. At the end of the conversation, the girls were asked about their emotional state. The length of the interviews ranged between 90 and 150 minutes, which translated into 165 pages of interview transcripts. The analytical work in IPA proceeds in several steps: from taking notes on the transcriptions and extracting emerging themes, which are then assigned to more general themes, each step is developed on a case-by-case basis so that patterns can be searched across all participants. Finally, tables of results and tables of quotations are also produced and used in the development of the research report.

## Credibility and Ethics

The research process presented in the article was conducted according to the guidelines for IPA research implementation (Smith et al. 2009). The correctness of the implementation of the IPA assumptions was discursively reviewed with the creator of the approach—Jonathan A. Smith. The feedback obtained during the discussion is testimony to the reliability of the study's results. In addition, both authors of the article were involved in the analytical work, which allowed for the ongoing confrontation of their pre-assumptions, contentious issues, and interpretive doubts. The principles of voluntary participation in the study, anonymity and confidentiality of the information, and its safe storage were observed in the relations with the participants of the study. Adolescent girls, with prior consent from their parents, were informed about the aims of the project and knew the tools for collecting data and

their role in it. In the transcriptions, the real names of the participants were replaced with pseudonyms, and any information that would allow them to be identified was deleted. The audio-recorded interviews were collected in a folder and secured with a password. The data produced during the study were also secured.

## Data Analysis

Interview transcriptions were raw empirical material analyzed according to the IPA guidelines (Smith et al. 2009). The analyses aimed at preparing notes on transcriptions, identifying emerging themes, and compiling them to search for common master themes. Such a scheme was repeated for the development of each transcription. The basis for further analysis was tables of results, developed separately for each examined case.

Age was to be the variable that would divide the participants into two groups of three so that internal comparisons could be made. During the analyses, it became apparent that revealing themes were present in both groups, and the division by age did not, at that point, provide noticeable differences in how emerging feelings or fears of the end of relationships were experienced.

## Findings

As a result of the analyses, five master themes common to the entire group emerged. Below is a table of results (see: Table 2), from which one master theme will be described in detail regarding the engagement and work the participants performed for the relationship. The participants' narratives, representative of the subject described, are directly quoted under their pseudonyms.

**Table 2. Overview of the master theme and subordinate themes**

<b>Work to maintain intimacy and ensure a lasting relationship</b>	
<b>1. Troubleshooting the relationship</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Diagnosing, discussing, and explaining problems</li> <li>• Encouraging partners to talk, mitigating conflicts</li> <li>• Starting, conducting, and ending difficult conversations</li> </ul>
<b>2. Responsibility for the boy's emotional development</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Recognizing (guessing) partner's feelings</li> <li>• Interpreting partner's behavior through the prism of diagnosed emotions</li> <li>• Stimulating partner's feelings, seeking their attention and concerns</li> </ul>
<b>3. Recognizing the partner's and own feelings</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Analyzing the partner's intentions, behaviors, and gestures</li> <li>• Showing concern and interest</li> <li>• Caring for the emotional needs of partners and their health</li> </ul>
<b>4. Saving the relationship, hoping that the partner will change</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Strong involvement in the relationship and invalidating the emotions experienced in it</li> <li>• Striving for personality transformation of the partner</li> <li>• Ignoring the disrespectful attitude of the partner, betrayal, and violent behavior</li> </ul>
<b>5. Shifting responsibility from the boy and burdening others with it</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Rationalizing the reasons for the gradual departure of the partner</li> <li>• Blaming peers for decisions and mistakes made by the partner</li> <li>• Self-blaming of partners</li> </ul>

Source: *Self-elaboration.*

## Troubleshooting the Relationship

The difficulties encountered in the intimate relationship were the main topic of most of the narratives disclosed by the participants. The problems indicated by the girls usually concerned disregarding their emotional needs and the lack of involvement of partners in maintaining a satisfactory bond. The participants expected confirmation of their uniqueness in the form of showing them attention, time spent together, readiness to conduct conversations, and recognizing the importance of a relationship as a couple. Attempts to reach an agreement in the relationship were initiated only by them, making daily efforts to seek the attention of partners and their well-being. According to the participants, the experienced crises and the accompanying tensions resulted from the lack of readiness of the partners to talk freely and honestly. The participants of the study, at all costs, although sometimes unsuccessfully, sought to clarify the misunderstandings within the relationship, often colliding with the partners' reluctance to participate in the dialogue. Thus, the boys' communication difficulties are one of the most salient problems in a relationship, leading to the gradual distancing of partners and even breaking relationships.

The topic of the lack of conversations was most widely revealed in Beata's narrative. Initially, the girl tried to show understanding toward her partner's unexpected reluctance to stay in touch. In the face of receiving distant and evasive answers to her questions, her frustration grew, which led to minor conflicts and misunderstandings.

**In the beginning, I found, "Well, he's probably busy or just doesn't have time to write, or something,"** but then as it was longer, well, I talked to him, for

example, as he wrote with this one sentence, then "Oh, you don't want to talk to me again" or "You don't want to talk to me again," and so on, and he **texted back with something, then the topics would get cut back on again, then I would give up, then as we met, I would tell him again that it bothers me that he doesn't text me, that he can text with others for hours, and with me not anymore, and there he would say that I exaggerate that it is not as I see it.**<sup>1</sup>

[R6: Beata]

The girl's attempts to inform her partner about the feeling of being invalid and disregarded resulted only in a temporary change in his behavior. After short episodes of improvement, he returned to his earlier habits, withdrawing from talks with Beata. Attempts to draw attention to themselves did not bring the expected results but even deepened the partner's lack of recognition of its value and uniqueness. Thus, the relationship experienced by the participant was a source of constant frustration, anger, and dissatisfaction for her.

When I love someone, that is, or if I am infatuated and I know that I can text that person about problems, and since he would not text me, I just felt that I am not such a person for him because I also like being a person to whom one can text, talk to, and I would like to help, and since he would not text me and treat me in such a way that I am such support for him, **then I simply stated that I am not so important to him.**

[R6: Beata]

Similar feelings accompanied Magda, who struggled with her partner's disrespectful approach to the difficulties encountered in the relationship. To identify the source of the problems, the girl tried to

<sup>1</sup> All emphases in the quotes by the authors.



control the expression of her emotions. The repeated suggestions of the partner deprived the girl of her self-confidence:

I was convinced that there was something wrong with me because he kept saying, “Well, a bit of slack,” so I wouldn’t clasp. [R4: Magda]

Her need to engage naturally in issues crucial to the quality of relationships has been weakened by the belief that she takes the topic too seriously. At the end of the relationship, however, she noticed that her greater independence and setting boundaries allowed her to maintain her position in the relationship.

Now, in retrospect, **if I did not let them do it all so easily, maybe they would gain a little more respect for me** and also, say, for example, as they did that they stopped talking or spoke so little, they would **not do it, because, for example, they would know that “Gosh, if I do so, she will just walk away from me and not want me, if I act like that,** because she is so serious.” [R4: Magda]

In the case of Magda, the experience gained from intimate relationships resulted in the feeling of inadequacy in her efforts to achieve the results. The open formulation of perceived needs and expectations has been marked with a label of excessive problem-solving and the lack of expected distance.

While in the case of Beata and Magda, attempts to establish a conversation about the difficulties in the relationship did not bring the expected results, Alicja’s actions proved to be somehow compelling. The participant effectively managed emotions in the relationship, took responsibility for their sensation, and, most importantly, encouraged the part-

ner to participate in the conversation. However, the manner and circumstances in which that occurred are associated with exerting pressure.

There are sometimes some quarrels, such as that something does not suit me, I immediately go and say it, and I say, “Listen, I would like to talk to you because it does not suit me,” and then it often **happens that he does not necessarily as if he wanted to talk to me and was so open at once, only it was necessary to press him a little to talk to me about it.** [R5: Alicja]

### **Responsibility for the Boy’s Emotional Development**

The lack of readiness of the boys to openly communicate the experienced states triggered in the participants the need to develop their partners’ affection. Embedding themselves in the role of emotion management specialists, the girls attempted to diagnose (or rather guess) the emotions felt by their partners and interpret their characteristic behaviors. An element combining the diverse romantic experiences of girls taking part in the study is the belief that they know much more about their boyfriends than they do. Striving to change a partner and shaping their readiness to function in a relationship based on closeness and mutual engagement are the signs of taking responsibility for the development of boys’ emotionality.

In the case of Alicja, shaping an intimate relationship was associated with arousing the partner’s feelings during the relationship as well as after its completion. The girl stood in the role of a competent person, emotionally mature and aware of her expectations. She played the role of a mentor, leading to a personality change in her partner.

I was just such a person who also **saw some things after him, and I, as if, directed him to show feelings** because he was such a closed person when it comes to feelings, and I was the person who **awakened** those feelings in him, and he liked it. [R5: Alicja]

Her boyfriend was a particularly closed and emotionally withdrawn person. Alicja even described him as a "block of ice," which was supposed to symbolize a cold and distant man. Most likely, she wanted to emphasize the partner's helplessness and thus, the need to manage him:

he is such a **difficult person when it comes to love**. Not everyone would be able to be with such a person because it is sometimes a bit **like with such a child, but on the other hand, such a block of ice, such a very mysterious person**. He is very mysterious, and you never know what he wants, so not everyone can be in such a mystery, and he is also a person who is **not able to show everything**. [R5: Alicja]

Being with a difficult person was something to be proud of for the participant. Convinced of the strength of their feelings with extraordinary effectiveness, she crushed the emotional barriers of the partner, leading to his gradual opening. Thus, the sense of influence was a source of growing self-satisfaction and confirmed the girl's conviction that she had special interpersonal skills.

### Recognizing the Partner's and Own Feelings

Recognizing a partner's feelings is not only part of the work related to the development of their emotionality. It is also a condition to feel loved. The participants revealed a similar idea of what it means to be loved. They thoroughly analyzed the signs of falling in love resulting from the bodies of partners

(gestures, facial expressions) and their behavior. Verbal declarations did not occur on their part, and the belief about the duration or gradual disappearance of love was assessed by a subjective interpretation of the observed facts. Being in physical contact, showing support and giving help, caring for health and safety was what meant that you loved or were loved. In turn, the lack or insufficient number of signs of interest was a source of concern and doubt.

For example, Judyta looked for indicators of her boyfriend's crush based on his desire to maintain constant physical contact:

**he showed it more just by hugging me, he always had to hold my hand, so I sometimes knew somewhere around here I had to correct my purse or something, I say: "What? Am I going to hold your hand all the time, as soon as I have to take it out?" and he "No, always by the hand."** [R2: Judyta]

Beata identified the boy's feelings in his spontaneously externalized concern in everyday situations. His interest in her affairs, inquiring about her well-being or health brought her to the state of certainty that the feelings nourished between them were authentic and sincere.

**I see that someone cares about me the most, I see that I am just important to this person because you can't pretend to care, pretend to be interested.** [R6: Beata]

She responded to the partner's experience with the same commitment. She was eager to take care of his physical health, she watched over the results in science. Taking care of her partner was a natural determinant of her emotions toward him. Beata is an example of a partner who validates her role in

the relationship by providing certain services to the partner.

Caring for a partner is also revealed in the narrative of Judyta and Alicja:

**It was with him that I had to go to the doctor because I said: "If I do not go with you, you will not go at all."** [R2: Judyta]

It was difficult for me just that he... that I will not always be in the first place, that I will always be the most important, that there will be a school, that the change of school and also **it was difficult for me to give such support, just that sometimes you have to take a grip and be with such a person, and not only have to care about their problems, and sometimes you have to break through and listen to their problems even for a week.** [R5: Alicja]

It can be seen that being in an emotional relationship is about meeting each other's emotional needs. The scant involvement of participants has been a source of concern as to the quality of the experienced relationship. The partner's greater efforts testified to his love and gave a sense of security.

**He was always there to walk me home, to watch** over whether I was all right. It was as if he could **take care of me** and, gradually, it came out on its own. I have seen **what he does for me** and that he is so dear to me. And that, even though he once told me that he was afraid of my parents, he talked to them anyway, he was coming there anyway, and **he was coming to me more than I was coming to him**, and he was taking the tram himself. [R3: Natalia]

The issue of taking care of the safety of the girls is often mentioned by the participants. Sometimes, it

comes down to treating the participant as someone who simply requires help, like a younger sister. For example, Alicja saw herself in the eyes of her partner as his younger sister:

**he always looked at me as such a younger sister, as such a person that he could take care of**, that he could always come to and listen to, but also who needed, and he felt needed. [R5: Alicja]

The concern for girls' safety in their partners' behavior coincides with the features and behaviors attributed stereotypically to both sexes. Gentlemen are usually described as strong and courageous. Women as physically weaker and exposed to various dangers.

### **Saving the Relationship, Hoping That the Partner Will Change**

The sense of responsibility shared by the participants for shaping relationships had far-reaching consequences. Strong commitment to the partner, belief in the uniqueness of feelings, and the effort put into developing the relationship resulted in deep conviction about the need to save the threatened relationship at all costs. Although Alicja does not explicitly say that she shapes her statement based on her experiences, she encourages her colleagues to fight for relationships if they are convinced of their feelings. Love, even if one-sided and imagined, is a sufficient condition to reactivate the relationship and arouse the feelings of the partner.

**If they love this person, it is possible to arrange everything and get along with this person**, and if you do not feel it to such a fairly severe degree, well, then there is already a problem because feelings that are already dormant disappear, then there is a problem

with **saving anything or building** anything. [R5: Alicja]

Magda and Milena took various actions to save the relationship, even when participating in it was associated with experiencing unpleasant emotions and, in Milena’s case, even violence. Significantly, the participants’ hope for an effective change of partner was not understood by people from their immediate environment.

Everyone told me then, “Magda, it doesn’t make sense, break up with him because it will be the same again and you will be tired; break up faster because later it will be too late for you and you will be just worse,” and I said then that **“It is not that it can’t be saved somehow.”** [R4: Magda]

Those girls in the class also advised me against it; **they said that I should leave him as soon as possible, but I could not because, in theory, I loved him, and I did not want to, and I hoped that he would change.** [R1: Milena]

At the time of the interview, Magda and Milena were already after the definitive termination of the relationship. The determination to maintain a relationship and the belief that the boy would change his behavior for them was ultimately something that the girls regretted. Alicja still believes in the possibility of improving the relationship.

### **Shifting Responsibility From the Boy and Burdening Others With It**

The participants, especially those who did not understand the reason for the deterioration of the relationship, repeatedly analyzed the possible reasons for the breakup, adopting different interpretations

of what happened. Girls focused on searching for the sources of difficulties in the boy’s person (his needs, family situation, psychological features), external factors, independent of the boys, less often assuming that they ceased to be loved. They were accompanied by a sense of confusion and misunderstanding of the boy, sometimes there was a hope of reactivating the relationship. The end of the relationship or its crisis was a threat to the girls’ self-esteem. For example, Alicja’s responsibility for the betrayal of the boy is initially attributed to herself. For her, betrayal was a humiliating experience.

It was hard for me because betrayal for me was, above all, a very humiliating experience—for me, that I was not. Why it happened—I **also blamed myself for the fact that maybe I wasn’t such a good partner, that maybe I broke something somewhere, and that maybe I wasn’t enough for him.** [R5: Alicja]

She did not understand what led the boy to cheat. It was only with time that she freed herself from the feeling that she was not a good enough partner, blaming other girls in the club or writing to the boy.

**Girls are also different nowadays**, not only boys because most people hide behind the fact that boys are so terrible, and so on, but, unfortunately, there are more and more cases that **girls are terrible and can sometimes cause such harm to another person that this person bounces back for a long time. Just like that. Well, a little bit of alcohol, a little bit of it, and it turned out that she somehow kissed him there.** [R5: Alicja]

Magda, on the other hand, denied the possibility of having no feelings or losing interest in her for

no reason. Her attempts to cope with difficult emotions involved analyzing the boy's family, school, and emotional situation.

I was just so **broken down, and I started to think of some different theories**, that maybe, I don't know, that maybe he can't cope and that he can't cope, but that the **school overwhelms him**, well, the school does such things with us, we have such stress that maybe he **has such** stress that he can't handle it anymore, and that's why he did so that he didn't want to or his **dad left him and his** mom in general, like when he was little, I began to wonder **whether he did not have any disease, that he could not name feelings and I found the disease**, it was to such an extent that I simply sketched that I found the name of the disease, which, alexithymia it is called. [R4: Magda]

## Discussion

The study aimed at capturing what meanings young teenagers give their first love experiences. A detailed idiographic analysis allowed us to present rich reports on the emotionally leading role of participants in their relationships. In most of the participants, there was a thread of experiencing the lack of involvement of partners, not only in the context of giving attention but also in readiness to discuss relationship issues. The participants undertook various strategies to deal with difficulties in the relationship. First, they analyzed emerging emotions (their own and their partner's), assessed the level of engagement, and analyzed the sources of failures in relationships and partner's behaviors by past experiences or character features. Secondly, the participants sought to improve the functioning of the relationship, which could be related to their idea of the re-

lationship as a work area. During interviews, they often used such terms as building and expanding, awakening, solving, and developing. How the participants talked about intimate relationships corresponds to the model of love as work (Illouz 1997; 2010; 2016). In that cultural model, the relationship is a sphere of intentional activities, such as building, investing, negotiating, and ensuring the durability and satisfaction of both partners. Its source is contemporary therapeutic discourses often directed to girls and women, looking for the normative determinants of what a *healthy* and *unhealthy* relationship means. However, access to specific discourses has a cultural dimension. Eva Illouz (1997) showed in her analyses that romantic experiences and the superimposition of meanings on them can differentiate membership of a particular social class. For example, men from the lower social classes viewed emotional relationships in a much more romantic way than men from the middle and upper classes. Differences between classes were also highlighted in terms of the criteria taken into account when choosing a partner, such as having requirements to possess certain psychological characteristics indicative of cultural capital. Although both middle- and upper-class participants used the romantic narrative, they did not pursue it stereotypically, being more flexible toward the romantic love code. Participants' narratives and interpretations of their love experiences may thus stem from their habitus (Bourdieu 2005). Their middle-class membership and possession of higher cultural competence may also pave the way for them to access cultural texts in which the therapeutic discourse is revealed, but also to obtain psychological support. In the long term, it would be interesting to include people from different social classes and with different cultural capital.



Perhaps for this reason, the image of *youthful love* emerging from their narrative differs from stereotypical images, referring to spontaneous heartbreaks and accompanying joyful experiences. From the story of adolescents, an image of an asymmetrical relationship emerges, which, instead of winging and adding energy, adds many worries and complex emotions. Considering that the participants felt responsible for maintaining the relationship in good condition, it is not surprising that they could feel emotional exhaustion and disappointment with their experiences. In that respect, the relationships of adolescents were consistent with the results of research on the involvement of adult women in maintaining relationships (Duncombe and Marsden 1993; 1995; Brannon 2017) or with the “feminization of love” (Cancian 1986). Its essence boiled down to a culturally sanctioned division of duties customarily attributed to women and men in intimate relationships. Traditional gender roles, along with the accompanying gender stereotypes, set the standards of proximity and the types of behavior characteristic of them. The role of emotion management specialists was subordinated to women. The belief that women are emotionally self-aware, caring, and willing to sacrifice has made them responsible for the quality of their intimate relationships. The main areas of their influence were emotions and feelings between both partners. Men rather play the role of “hero, a conqueror who seduces, breaks the rules, protects, saves, dominates and receives” (Ceretti and Navarro 2018:80).

The obtained results indicate that the problems experienced by the participants are similar to those experienced by adult women—lack of emotional commitment of the partner and uneven

efforts of women and their partners to maintain relationships. Such a division into emotionally developed women and cold men might be perpetuated by early childhood socialization. Boys have few opportunities to practice developing intimacy. Their communication with friends is less emotional than in the case of girls (Giordano, Longmore, and Manning 2001). Parents talk about emotional states depending on the sex of the child. As a result, the patterns of talking about emotions may affect boys’ emotional development (Kyrtzis 2001). Maybe that is why we may observe their lower level of confidence in managing emotional relationships and greater dependence.

The norms and restrictions typical of the modern gender contract are dynamic. The changes occurring in them are a consequence of broadly understood transformations taking place, among others, in the economy, politics, customs, and identities of people functioning in a globalized world (Szlendak 2008; Jasińska-Kania 2012). Although contemporary literature points to significant transformations in men’s identity and identity construction, the obtained emotional research results do not allow them to be noticed in adolescents’ intimate relationships. Stereotypes and gender roles functioning in culture are still an important interpretative framework for the love they experience (McQueen 2017; 2022). Thus, understanding the identity transformation of representatives of both sexes requires further research in which both boys and girls share their thoughts about their experiences in intimate relationships. Such a type of analysis would be a salient extension of the research presented in the article, encouraging us to undertake another research project.

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