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## EXPLORING THE IMPACT OF UPBRINGING ON THE FORMATION AND WAYS OF EXPRESSING PREFERRED LOVE LANGUAGE

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**Abstract:** Understanding how a person expresses love is not solely about observing others, but also requires observing ourselves to figure out how we want to be loved. Using autoethnographic method and the framework of love languages by Gary Chapman (2015), the study analyzes my love languages to find out how mine are formed through my parents' primary love languages influences. Furthermore, the concept of love languages extends beyond family bonds to intimate relationships, so this autoethnography also explores the expression of love languages in my romantic relationship to understand how I receive and demonstrate my concern towards my partner. Besides the preferred love languages inherited from my parents, the desire for another distinct type of love language is discovered during the process of being in a romantic relationship. This demonstrates that people can long for experiencing an unfamiliar love language expression due to their lack of exposure to that particular love language type from their parents. Therefore, by understanding the differences among people's preferences for expressing their care and love towards others, I conclude that it is necessary to learn how to appreciate the differences and embrace the need of mutual understanding to help people maintain their relationships.

*Keywords:* autoethnography, love language, children's love language, romantic relationship, communication in love

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# KHÁM PHÁ TÁC ĐỘNG CỦA QUÁ TRÌNH NUÔI DƯỠNG BỞI BỐ MẸ ĐẾN VIỆC HÌNH THÀNH VÀ CÁCH THỂ HIỆN NGÔN NGỮ YÊU THƯƠNG

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**Tóm tắt:** Để có thể hiểu cách thể hiện tình yêu thương của một người đòi hỏi việc quan sát người khác và cả chính mình để thấu được cách bản thân muốn được yêu thương. Bài nghiên cứu này sử dụng phương pháp tự sự dân tộc học và khung lý thuyết về ngôn ngữ tình yêu của Gary Chapman (2015) để phân tích các ngôn ngữ tình yêu của tôi nhằm tìm hiểu cách chúng được hình thành dưới ảnh hưởng từ ngôn ngữ yêu thương chính của bố mẹ. Hơn nữa, khái niệm ngôn ngữ tình yêu không chỉ gói gọn trong mối quan hệ gia đình mà còn được quan sát trong các mối quan hệ tình cảm. Vì vậy, nghiên cứu này còn khám phá thêm về cách mà ngôn ngữ tình yêu của tôi được thể hiện và đón nhận trong một mối quan hệ lãng mạn nhằm hiểu rõ hơn cách tôi bày tỏ sự quan tâm với đối phương. Bên cạnh những ngôn ngữ tình yêu được hình thành từ sự ảnh hưởng của bố mẹ, trong quá trình yêu đương, tôi nhận ra bản thân mình khao khát một dạng ngôn ngữ tình yêu khác biệt - một điều mà tôi chưa từng có cơ hội trải nghiệm từ gia đình. Điều này cho thấy rằng con người có thể mong muốn một kiểu thể hiện tình yêu khác do thiếu sự tiếp xúc với dạng ngôn ngữ tình yêu đó từ nhỏ. Từ sự khác biệt trong cách mỗi người bày tỏ và tiếp nhận tình yêu, tôi rút ra kết luận rằng việc học cách trân trọng sự khác biệt và nuôi dưỡng sự thấu hiểu lẫn nhau là điều cần thiết để giúp các mối quan hệ được duy trì và phát triển bền vững.

*Từ khóa:* tự sự dân tộc học, ngôn ngữ tình yêu, ngôn ngữ tình yêu của trẻ em, mối quan hệ lãng mạn, giao tiếp trong tình yêu

## 1. Introduction

Love is a prevalent topic that is frequently discussed in various areas of life, from the silver screen to the pages of classic literature. Researchers have dedicated substantial efforts to unraveling the multifaceted ways in which love is expressed and communicated among individuals. This domain of inquiry extends far beyond the romantic connections between intimate partners, as it also encompasses the profound affection that parents share with their children, as well as the care and support that children provide for their aging parents. In Vietnam, where family values are deeply cherished, the mutual care and concern between parents and their children is the norm, providing the strong bonds and affection within the family unit, plays an integral part of the Vietnamese culture and social fabric.

In the process of figuring out my personal needs for receiving love, I was introduced to Gary Chapman's influential work and his "Five Love Languages" theory (2015). This conceptual framework sheds light on the distinct ways in which individuals perceive and experience love, and how recognizing these differences can deepen the mutual understanding and intimacy within relationships. Moreover, after encountering Chapman's statement (2015) regarding the formative influence of parental models on children's love language perceptions, I was inspired to discover the love language preferences that my parents own and how those tendencies may have shaped the development of my own during my upbringing.

To explore this, the autoethnographic approach was adopted by drawing from my personal experiences, and memories extending up to the present moment. This study focuses on my parents' everyday activities to provide deeper insight into how parents' routine actions reflect their preferred ways of demonstrating affection and care.

Besides the influence of my parents' love languages, I am also curious whether other factors might contribute to the differences in how people express or desire love. This inspires me to venture beyond the initial exploration of parental influences, seeking to uncover how individuals can aspire to develop and embody other love language types over time. By reflecting on my current romantic relationship, I aim to examine the process of receiving and expressing love languages in a contemporary context.

This topic's investigating process not only enhances my self-awareness but also broadens my perspective on love languages and relationship dynamics, ultimately supporting my personal growth. Through a detailed examination of the love language preferences of my parents and me, this study aims to shed light on the intricate interplay between familial influences and individual love language development. Additionally, by exploring the potential for individuals to expand their love language types, the research aspires to empower people with the knowledge and tools that are necessary to foster deeper and more meaningful connections.

After this introduction, the paper delves into the theoretical framework of love languages, establishing a basis for the core research. With data presentation demonstrating expressions of love within familial and romantic relationships, the discussion section links the findings to existing research, emphasizing the paper's contributions.

## 2. Review of Love Languages

### 2.1. Five Love Languages

Love language theory, developed by Chapman (2015), describes the distinctive ways individuals prefer to give and receive love. The five primary love languages are: *Words of Affirmation*, *Quality Time*, *Gift Giving*, *Acts of Service*, and *Physical Touch* (Chapman, 2015).

Firstly, according to Chapman (2015), *Words of Affirmation* emphasizes verbal compliments, encouraging words, and kind words as powerful ways to communicate love. This includes directly praising one's partner as well as speaking favorably about them to others, even when they are not present. Individuals who value this love language greatly appreciate verbal expressions of affection and support, as these reinforce their emotional connection. Also, to express love through verbal communication, it is essential to utilize "kind words" which are noted when our messages are interpreted "based on our tone of voice, not the words we use" (Chapman, 2015, p. 38).

Besides, thoughtful actions that demonstrate care, such as helping with chores or performing small acts of kindness are considered as *Acts of Service*. These actions require thoughtfulness, planning, and effort, and can be seen as expressions of love when done with a positive attitude (Chapman, 2015). However, even partners with the same primary love language may struggle if they are speaking different dialects of that language, meaning they may not be focusing on the specific aspects most meaningful to each individual (Chapman, 2015).

Moreover, the *Gift Giving* love language centers around the giving and receiving of tangible presents. Chapman (2015) demonstrates that receiving a gift can instill a sense of

remembrance in the recipient, and the act of securing the gift shows the expression of love. However, this is not about promoting materialism, but rather emphasizing the "thought that counts" to provide gifts to others (Chapman, 2015, p. 149). In addition to material gifts, the "gift of presence" or "the gift of self" (Chapman, 2015, pp. 70-71) is also considered valuable, emphasizing that simply "being there" (Chapman, 2015, p. 71) for a partner can be a meaningful gift that speaks to their love language.

Furthermore, *Quality Time* involves dedicating one's undivided attention and engaging in meaningful conversations with a partner. This goes beyond just physical proximity, but rather emphasizes the emotional bond that develops through thoughtful, uninterrupted conversation and shared experiences (Chapman, 2015). *Quality Time* encompasses dialects like quality conversation, which centers on active listening and open self-disclosure of experiences, ideas, and feelings. When *Quality Time* is a primary love language, a partner's emotional needs can only be fully met through this type of empathetic dialogue (Chapman, 2015).

Finally, Chapman (2015) shows that *Physical Touch* focuses on physical contact as a way of communicating emotional love such as hand-holding, embracing, and sexual intimacy. This is an important means of expressing emotions and clarifying the meaning of verbal and nonverbal communication (Gallace & Spence, 2010). Chapman (2015) emphasizes that *Physical Touch* can be a more powerful form of expression than "words like "I love you" or "I hate you" (p. 96). Research shows that different types of touch, such as hugging, kissing, and caressing, are used to communicate "love, care, fondness, or appreciation" (Jabukiak & Feeney, 2017, p. 2). Interpersonal touch plays a critical role in fostering connections, enhancing well-being, and facilitating the transmission of emotions, especially in parent-child and romantic relationships (Debrot et al., 2013; Sorokowska et al., 2021).

## **2.2. Love Language Identification**

According to Gary Chapman's theory of the five love languages (2015), there are a few ways to identify a person's primary love language. Firstly, their greatest pain points often reveal the opposite of their preferred love language. This is what provides me with the indication of how I always feel disappointed and hurtful when people fail to pay close attention when I'm talking and expressing myself. Secondly, the things they most frequently request from their partner tend to align with their love language needs because the type of love they most often ask for is usually their primary way of feeling cherished. Finally, the way a person typically expresses love to their partner can be indicative of their own love language preferences.

All the three methods outlined for identifying one's primary love languages provide valuable insights which offer concrete reference points and examples that demonstrate why an individual has a preference for receiving love in a certain way. Beyond just understanding my own love language, these techniques also shed light on the love languages of my family members, such as my parents. Observing how they care for and express affection to other family members gives me clues about their primary love languages.

Furthermore, applying these principles of love languages has been helpful in my romantic relationship. By identifying the differences in how my partner and I prefer to give and receive love, I have been able to understand the root causes of friction and disagreements. This knowledge has then enabled us to find more effective solutions to address those inconsistencies in how we express care for one another. Due to the variation of love language preferences among people, the challenge arises when couples use their own love language to show affection rather than catering to their partner's preferred language. Consequently, understanding each

other's primary love languages can help couples communicate love more effectively.

### ***2.3. Love Tank***

"Love tank" is a term used to describe emotional satisfaction based on receiving one's preferred love languages (Chapman, 2015). Besides, Chapman (2015) suggests recognizing different primary and secondary love languages is crucial for expressing and receiving love effectively in relationships because each person typically has a primary love language that they respond to most strongly. By filling one's love tank, people can create a more loving, fulfilling and lasting relationship.

### ***2.4. Children's Love Language Formation***

According to Chapman (2015), a child's emotional tank of love needs must be fulfilled by parents speaking their child's preferred love language, influencing their future preferences. My parents' example has significantly shaped the development of my own primary love language, which now influences my personality and relationship preferences. However, there are still unmet needs and other facets of my love language that I have yet to fully discover through continued self-exploration. As Brito (2019) mentions that "instinctual love" among a kid and parents can be exhibited from birth, while romantic love develops gradually and requires time due to the chemical reaction's differences. According to Brito (2019), people may fall in love with persons who resemble their parents or have comparable features because love is influenced by a person's psychological requirements. As a result, enhancing my self-awareness in this area of exploration can help me better communicate my authentic emotional requirements in my relationships.

### ***2.5. Effective Communication in Love***

Language allows for the expression of identity and emotions, and helps develop intimate connections (Adams, 2020). Effective communication is essential for nurturing and sustaining romantic relationships (İnce & Işık, 2021). On the other hand, misunderstandings can jeopardize relationships, so it is important for partners to learn about each other's unique identities and perspectives, and to communicate in ways that align with each other's preferred "love languages" (Berenson, 1991; Chapman, 2015). If our intention is to truly love one another, it becomes essential to be aware of and familiar with the wants and needs of the other person (Chapman, 2015).

Egbert and Polk (2006) investigated the impact of understanding love languages on romantic relationships and found that individuals who understood their partner's love language reported higher relationship satisfaction. Similarly, Bland and McQueen (2018) explored how love languages function within marital relationships, concluding that couples who intentionally practiced their partner's preferred love language demonstrated greater emotional connection and reduced conflict. By expressing love in a manner that matches their partner's expectations, individuals can enhance satisfaction and fulfillment in their romantic relationships (İnce & Işık, 2021; Adams, 2020). This research seeks to build upon existing knowledge regarding the Five Love Languages theory, with a specific focus on intergenerational influences and the potential for individuals to develop preferences for love languages that diverge from their early life experiences. The ultimate goal is to enhance my understanding of unmet needs and desires I have when in a relationship.

### 3. Methodology

Autoethnography combines personal narrative with scholarly analysis, using self-reflection to explore cultural experiences and contribute to sociological understanding (Adams et al., 2017; Drew, 2023; Sparkes, 2000). By bridging autobiography and ethnography, it provides first-hand insights into social phenomena, particularly in emotionally nuanced areas like love languages (Boyd, 2008; Rangiwai, 2021). With its subjective yet analytical nature, this method helps deeply explore how individuals express affection (Chapman, 2015).

Since love languages are highly personal, objective research methods may overlook their complexity (Emerald & Carpenter, 2015). Autoethnography, while enabling meaningful self-reflection, also requires careful navigation of ethical risks and biases (Edwards, 2021; Tamas, 2011). To ensure academic rigor, thematic analysis is applied to organize personal narratives into major categories, such as displays of affection and communication challenges (Braun et al., 2014). Therefore, as a suitable approach, autoethnography enables me to use my own experiences as valid data, providing first-hand experiences into how love languages function in real-life interactions.

To avoid over-generalization and bias, it is essential to have theoretical engagement by grounding analysis in existing research helps balance personal insight with established knowledge. Cross-referencing with existing literature ensures that personal narratives connect with broader academic discussions. Besides, through self-reflexivity, I critically examine how my perceptions of love languages evolve across relationships, addressing key questions such as: *“How are my love languages formed? How do I navigate unfamiliar expressions of love?”*. By engaging with existing literature, I ensure my analysis remains balanced and well-grounded by using chosen narratives based on their relevance to the research question, ensuring they illustrate key themes in the study.

This exploration has deepened my understanding of how my family and partner express love, shaping my emotional identity and relationship dynamics. As a result, the autoethnography research method is well-suited to explore and examine my personal story in-depth, helping me understand my emotional needs and preferences for receiving love.

### 4. Finding and Discussions

#### 4.1. Realization of Love Language's Importance

During the first time encountering the concept of love languages at the age of nineteen, I did not give much thought to how it is applied to me in my daily life. It was not until I came across a YouTube podcast in August 2023 that this concept really resonated with me. The podcast, part of Dinology's "Foodcast Series", featured a discussion with his friend, Ms. Khanh Vy about learning strategies and love life. A key point that stood out was Dinology's explanation that our love language was shaped by how our parents expressed love to us through their dominant love language expressions (2023). He said, “If we were raised with a specific language of love, we would tend to express that love language in the future” (Dinology, 2023, 1:15:59).

This was an insightful "Aha moment" for me, which prompted me to reflect on how my parents' dominant love languages had influenced the way I now express and desire to receive love, both in my family relationships and future romantic partnerships. I realized that understanding our own and our partner's primary love languages could be crucial for enhancing relationship satisfaction and fulfillment.

#### ***4.2. A Lack of Physical Touch Affection from Parents***

According to Adams (2020), our early years significantly influence how we give and receive love, with many traits originating from how we were cared for as children. Furthermore, parents' models, personality traits, and love perceptions affect the children's actions (Chapman, 2015).

From a young age, I have been exposed to many media portrayals that emphasize the significance of family bonds, particularly around Mother's Day. As a sensitive person, I often find myself deeply moved to tears when watching the heartwarming videos of daughters expressing their love and appreciation for their mothers through gifts, affectionate hugs, or tender kisses. However, in my own family, I do not typically display this type of overt emotional expression or physical affection, even though I care deeply for my parents. The open displays of love and gratitude that I witness in these media depictions stand in contrast to the more reserved manner in which my family tends to express our familial bonds.

In a conversation with friends in my grade nine, one of my best friends described how she enjoyed hugging her parents or engaging in other affectionate physical interactions, which left me feeling a sense of envy, as such displays were unfamiliar to me. Because in my family, we rarely showed affection through hugging, kissing, or other physical gestures, even between my parents. The idea of casually, freely wrapping my arms around my own mother or father, as my friend so naturally did with her parents, filled me with a sense of awkwardness. It was not something I was accustomed to, as we tended to express our love and appreciation for each other in more reserved, subtle ways within the context of my family. The open, effortless physicality that my friend described between her and her mom contrasted starkly with my own upbringing and experiences.

However, I still feel that there was an unfulfilled longing within me. As Adams (2020, p. 120) explains, "the natural yearnings of unmet emotional need" arise when a person's primary love language is not adequately expressed. When people feel a lack of something, they will naturally crave to have that need fulfilled (Dinology, 2023). This is why I felt a sense of jealousy when my friends described their regular, affectionate hugs with their mothers – it highlighted an empty place in my heart that craved to receive that type of physical love. This left me feeling a sense of awkwardness and longing for that kind of intimate connection. The yearning for physical touch remained a silent melody, harmonizing with my desire for a deeper emotional connection and the warmth, comfort, and closeness that physical affection can bring.

#### ***4.3. Love Languages Expressions***

Despite the lack of outward physical expressions of love, I never felt unloved by my parents. Reflecting on the insights from Chapman's "The Five Love Languages" (2015), I have come to the realization that my parents likely have their own distinct and individualistic approach to demonstrating affection, which may differ from the idealized portrayals often presented in media and marketing. It is important for me to approach my parents' expressions of love with empathy and understanding, rather than comparing them to societal norms or expectations.

##### **4.3.1. Acts of Service - My Father's Expressions**

The primary individual responsible for carrying out daily cleaning tasks in the family home is my father. When the floor is full of sand, dust, and trash such as candy wrappers, cigarette butts, or bitten sunflower seed shells, he keeps himself busy by cleaning. He holds the

belief that "Each person should support one another, and there are no tasks that boys or girls cannot undertake" which contributes to my admiration towards him as he approaches these responsibilities with a sense of joy, even when feeling fatigued. His attitude of perceiving "Labor is glory" highlights his dedication to supporting my family through *Acts of Service*.

Receiving the positive attitude from my father, my whole family willingly shares and takes turns with household responsibilities enabling my mother to enjoy moments of relaxation and socializing. While my father's contributions play a role, my mother readily steps in when he is unable to complete a task, which has taught me the significance of offering sincere assistance, even through small acts. When performed with a positive attitude, these actions truly become demonstrations of love (Chapman, 2015). Therefore, I am able to perceive the deep love that my parents have for each other through their *Acts of Service* - the willingness to support one another and share the workload as needed.

According to relationship expert Gary Chapman, when a child frequently expresses gratitude for simple *Acts of Service*, it can indicate that acts of service is their primary love language (2015). In my case, the little, everyday tasks I am able to help with in my family setting have shaped my love language to be *Acts of Service*, this is how I have come to naturally express and desire to receive acts of kindness from others.

#### **4.3.2. Acts of Service - My Mother's Expressions**

On numerous occasions, I often find myself envious of my friends' close and affectionate relationships with their mothers. In contrast, my interactions with my mother tend to be brief and lack the warmth I observe in others' mother-daughter dynamics. This stark difference has caused me to feel self-pity and a strong desire for the same level of maternal attention and affection. Overtime, I come to understand that our family does not have to adhere to the "traditional" mother-daughter relationship because we are unique individuals with our distinct ways of expressing emotions.

My mother has a rather strict and quick-tempered personality, and she seems hesitant to openly express her emotions, especially when it comes to love since she rarely displays affection towards my father, me or my two younger sisters. However, for someone whose primary love language is *Acts of Service*, the way my mother expresses her love is through her actions - the meals she meticulously prepares, the repairs of clothing she makes, and her unwavering dedication to ensuring our family's well-being. Also, her dedication in handling household chores and creating delectable meals is what stands out the most since it becomes particularly evident during festive occasions or when we have the pleasure of hosting guests. I am always filled with amazement by the way my mother could effortlessly manage the various responsibilities of running the family store, doing the laundry, and cooking meals for our entire household on a daily basis. In comparison, it takes me a full hour to prepare just a single dish of rice paper rolls.

Moreover, her concern for my well-being is further demonstrated by the thoughtfully packed provisions she sends whenever I return to my rented abode in Hanoi. These behaviors taught me to deeply appreciate and value the effort my parents put into preparing even the smallest of dishes for me. Her acts of care and consideration speak volumes about my mother's depths of love for me, and I hold these gestures in the highest regard.

#### **4.3.3. Acts of Service - My Expressions**

Parents' models play a crucial role in shaping a child's personality, actions, and perception of love (Chapman, 2015). My parents, through their consistent acts of kindness, have



shaped my perspective on the significance of simple acts of kindness. When spending time with my friends, I eagerly assist with tasks like carrying bags or preparing meals. They sometimes tease that I am even "more gallant than men", but I find great comfort and contentment in these actions, as they make me feel genuinely useful and allow me to demonstrate my sincere concern for the people in my life. Even small gestures like holding a door open or assisting with belongings, which may seem insignificant to some, hold deep meaning for me. I greatly appreciate when others extend similar acts of kindness, as I believe that simple caring gestures can make someone's day a little easier. These experiences have shaped my perspective on the profound impact that small acts of consideration can have on others.

Understanding that my parents express love primarily through *Acts of Service* has changed how I communicate with them. Just by actively getting some fruits cut after lunch or folding their clothes when they are too busy working outside, it is my gradual effort to reciprocate their love language and make them feel valued. Consequently, I hope to receive gestures and actions reflecting the same level of care and consideration that I strive to extend to those around me, believing in the reciprocal nature of kindness. This belief in the reciprocal nature of kindness has ingrained in me a genuine desire to continue offering support and assistance to my loved ones.

#### **4.4. Quality Time**

##### **4.4.1. What I appreciate most**

For me, the moments I cherish most with my family are the times when the power goes out during chilly, cool days. While some may view this as eccentric, I find great meaning in these experiences. During power outages, I have the opportunity to disconnect from the distractions of social media and spend valuable, uninterrupted time with my family and neighbors.

Without access to electronics or the internet, my sisters and I would gather flashlights and set up chairs to sit together and enjoy the peaceful outdoor breeze. Even on stormy nights, we would leave the door open to let the cool air flow through the house as we laid out a carpet and talked into the night. These were precious moments of undivided attention and presence with my family members, something I now deeply appreciate compared to when I used to divide my attention between my phone and the social media to pass the time and alleviate boredom.

The power outages allowed us to truly connect and be fully engaged with one another, free from the pull of digital distractions. I cherish these simple times because they reminded me that true care and appreciation come from fully devoting oneself to shared experiences and quality time with loved ones. The power of being "in the darkness" together brought us closer as a family in a way that technology often inhibits. These are the moments I treasure most when everyone lives in the moment and is present to each other.

##### **4.4.2. Quality Time Privilege**

As the firstborn in my family, I was able to witness the deep and loving bonds that developed through the small acts of care and attention my parents showed me. Whether it was tending to me when I was sick or accompanying me on my first day of school, their unwavering presence had a lasting impact on my heart. Before my two younger sisters were born, I was the sole recipient of their undivided love, and this is when my primary love language of *Quality Time* took root and flourished.

While setting aside quality time together can be challenging in the hustle and bustle of

daily life, our family mealtimes have become a sacred ritual where we can all come together. These shared meals, filled with laughter, conversation, and connection, nourish not only our bodies but also our hearts. In contrast to my reserved mother, my father has a gentler and more emotionally expressive persona. He is able to navigate social interactions with grace and cultivate numerous meaningful relationships, specifically, it is his remarkable talent for transforming these mundane meals into experiences of true togetherness and delight. Around the table, we become a symposium of voices, sharing our triumphs, challenges, and the simple joys of everyday life. These moments, as we gather around the table, reveal the true essence of *Quality Time*.

Every night before bed, he would come to our rooms and gently tuck us in, making sure we had fallen asleep and were ready for the next day. As a child, I may not have fully appreciated these gestures, but looking back now, I recognize the profound impact they had on my growth and development. My father's meticulous attention to detail instilled in me an organized and responsible mindset, demonstrating that thorough planning and preparation are essential for any kind of success. Thanks to him, I have learned invaluable life lessons, particularly in the art of offering undivided focus and genuine receptiveness to others. His actions also taught me the importance of being present and supportive for the people we care about, in whatever way we can. This helps me learn the significance of dedicating exclusive time to nurturing relationships which emphasizes the importance of truly listening and being present. Which creates my appreciation of fully immersing myself with my friends in the present moment during our conversations. In these instances, I feel a profound sense of connection with those around me. While it can be challenging for me to completely disengage from the demands of work, I make an effort to set boundaries and prioritize these invaluable moments to spend with the people who matter most to me. After being disrupted by unexpected messages and missing opportunities to truly listen to others, I now understand that being present involves more than just physical presence; it requires active engagement, sincere listening, and a genuine interest in the lives of the people we care about.

#### **4.5. Journey of Struggling, Accepting and Embracing Physical Touch Affection**

##### **4.5.1. Struggling**

As I entered a romantic relationship, I encountered a new form of *Physical Touch* that I had never experienced before. My partner, who values *Physical Touch* as a preferred love language, would express affection through gestures like hand-holding and hugging.

However, expressing love through *Physical Touch* can be challenging, especially when it is not one's primary love language or if one did not grow up in a "touching family" (Chapman, 2015, p. 97). For that reason, at first, this was uncomfortable and unfamiliar to me due to the lack of the familiarity and ease with physical intimacy, which created a barrier for me to become familiar and comfortable with my boyfriend's displays of physical affection. Even simple acts like hand-holding would make me experience shyness, uncertainty, and heightened self-consciousness when navigating these newfound intimate gestures, as the physical aspect of our relationship was novel and unfamiliar territory.

The absence of physical affection in my upbringing had clearly ingrained a sense of discomfort with such expressions of intimacy. Therefore, I would experience a momentary startle before I could gather my thoughts and figure out how to navigate such situations. During our dates, my shyness was evident as I only mustered the courage to hold the hem of his shirt when sitting on the back of his motorbike. Prior to initiating affection, I would deliberate

significantly, unsure whether to take the lead or wait for him to make the first move - a reflection of my uncertainty with *Physical Touch*.

#### 4.5.2. Accepting

One day, my boyfriend confronted me about not hugging him while sitting on the motorbike, concerned whether I did not feel comfortable when going out with him, since I did not actively perform actions, such as holding his hands and giving him a hug. This made him question whether I truly loved him, since I did not reciprocate the gestures that showed his care for me. As Chapman (2015) suggests, for those who highly value *Physical Touch* as a love language, the absence or lack of it can lead to significant emotional discomfort and distress because they may feel a sense of disconnection or emotional deprivation without the physical expressions of love and care.

Recognizing the importance of adapting to his love language, I made a conscious effort to understand and reciprocate his need for physical connection. Initially, these actions did not come naturally to me, but over time, I learned to integrate them into our relationship. Rather than just holding his hem of shirt on the motorbike for stability when sitting on the motorbike, I deliberately hugged him, and held his hand more often, allowing myself to experience the comfort of physical connection and demonstrate my love in a way that resonated with him. According to Debrot et al. (2013, p. 1380), when responsive touch is used toward a partner, it shows that their emotional state was linked to a stronger "positive affective valence in the touched partner". This form of nonverbal communication serves as an essential tool for emotion regulation in both mother-child relationships and romantic partnerships (Debrot et al., 2013). Embracing and cultivating this aspect of my relationship has strengthened the foundation of love and understanding between my partner and myself.

By actively embracing his love language of *Physical Touch* and adapting my approach, we were able to bridge the gap between our preferences. This allowed me to ensure he felt loved and appreciated through the physical expressions he valued. Through a learning process, I remain committed to nurturing our relationship by understanding and meeting his needs in a way that aligns with his love language. Overtime, my initial shyness and reservations faded and I began to eagerly desire more physical affection, finding a profound sense of security and fulfillment in the close physical connection. Then, I recognized that my longing for this love language had its roots in the lack of *Physical Touch* in my family upbringing.

#### 4.5.3. Embracing

As I reflect on adapting to *Physical Touch* in my romantic relationship, I cannot help but compare it to the lack of physical affection in my relationship with my parents. Hugs, kisses, and other physical displays of love were infrequent occurrences growing up. In stark contrast, my romantic relationship has introduced me to an entirely new level of physical affection and intimacy. I have learned that adapting my love language does not mean changing who I am but rather making intentional efforts to communicate love in ways my loved ones understand best.

As I started to become accustomed to receiving love from someone other than my parents, I encountered a novel form of attention that I had never experienced before. Dr. Gary Chapman (2015) confirms that our behaviors will not be the same as when we were deeply engrossed in the experience of being "in love" (p. 87). My partner, who values *Physical Touch* as a love language, introduced another dimension of love to me through gestures of hugging and caressing. Gradually, I realized I had an unmet emotional need - a "natural yearning" that arises when one's primary love language is not expressed (Adams, 2020). This explains the

reason why I felt jealous when friends spoke of regularly hugging their parents, as if there were an emptiness in my heart longing to be filled.

Reflecting on my past, I struggle to recall the last time I held my parents' hands, but I notice their wrinkled, calloused hands as the proof of their hard work in providing me the opportunity to focus on my education. I find myself wondering, "How did my parents show their love for me back then when I was a child?", because the memory of my mother's hand guiding me to school or my father's encouraging gestures eludes me. Instead, the memories that stand out most vividly are the instances of physical punishment. It was when my mother struck my hands with a whip until they swelled and turned red because I stole a milk blister without permission. Similarly, the recollection of the first time my father slapped me in 6th grade for lying about my academic results remains vivid. While these physical acts left a lasting impact, they were not the expressions of love and tenderness I deeply longed for. The scarcity of positive physical interactions with my parents is something I find myself grappling with, as I try to understand how their acts of love shaped my own perceptions and needs. Unintentionally, there was a harmonious longing for the warmth and comfort that affectionate gestures can bring.

#### ***4.6. The importance of effective communication in love***

Misunderstandings and disagreements are common occurrences within families, often leading to frustration when trying to express one's thoughts and feelings calmly. In conversations with my parents, there can be a mix of approaches - sometimes gentle reminders, and other times stern directives as they try to guide me based on their wishes for my well-being. While I recognize the love and concern underlying their actions, the imposed feelings make it challenging for me to adapt and respond in the way they might desire. During arguments with my parents, there are moments when I feel overwhelmed, unable to fully articulate my own desires and perspectives amidst the tears and emotional turmoil.

Within my family, we rarely have the opportunity to discuss our desires and intentions comfortably without making others feel uncomfortable due to the imposition of feelings. I greatly value listening to my parents, and I yearn for them to reciprocate by truly listening and supporting my own wishes and needs. My hope is that, over time, we can develop more effective communication strategies that enable us to openly share and comprehend each other's desires and perspectives which would create a more balanced and satisfying dynamic. With open discussions, I would like to help my parents become more aware of how they express care toward each other and other family members. This awareness would not only help them appreciate and value their relationship while preventing unnecessary conflicts but also give them the opportunity to better understand their own emotional needs and expectations.

In contrast, in my romantic relationships, equality allows for easier sharing and listening, fostering understanding. Therefore, effective communication is vital in any relationship because without mutual efforts to listen and support each other, satisfaction becomes elusive. Both parties must engage actively in communication for wishes to be met and understood, since it is crucial to communicate openly and work together to have feelings reciprocated properly. In my relationship, where *Acts of Service* is the shared love language, we still struggled to fully meet each other's expectations. While I appreciate my boyfriend's thoughtful gestures, there are specific actions I desire, such as his taking the lead in fastening my helmet. On the other hand, my partner longs for me to show care in ways like calling him instead of texting when he is unwell. Moreover, while I appreciate the comfort my boyfriend provides through his hugs and kisses, I cherish moments of deep conversation and quiet contemplation together. It is my longing for other's attentive listening when I am feeling down

that makes me feel respected, even if he does not physically embrace me. There have been times when, despite his physical consolation, I still felt the need for a more tranquil, eye-to-eye connection to fully express myself. Since *Quality Time* is not only about listening but the way that we learn to talk to have quality conversation, involving both sympathetic listening and self-disclosure (Chapman, 2015).

Becoming aware of how others perceive love has helped me respond to their needs with sensitivity rather than assuming they experience love the same way I do. From the difference in aspiring for small acts, we started to openly discuss our needs that are crucial for improving our relationship satisfaction. By recognizing love languages, we learned to enhance emotional connections, prevent misunderstandings, and build stronger bonds. This understanding should not be forced but encouraged, as it ultimately helps individuals navigate relationships with greater empathy and clarity.

By consciously embracing his preferred love language of *Physical Touch* and making a concerted effort to adjust my own behavior accordingly, we were able to overcome the disconnect caused by our differing preferences. This allowed me to ensure that he feels genuinely loved and valued through the acts and expressions that are most meaningful to him. It is an ongoing learning process for me to understand his needs and respond to them in a way that closely aligns with his primary love language. Similarly, through our conflicts, my boyfriend has come to realize that verbal reassurance and eye contact is what I need to feel comforted. Instead of offering generic words of encouragement, he now engages in direct conversations after disagreements, making me feel heard and emotionally secure. This mutual adaptation illustrates how becoming aware of love languages can significantly enhance relationship dynamics, fostering deeper emotional connection. In essence, through mutual adaptation and a commitment to meeting each other's emotional needs, we have been able to bridge the gap and strengthen the bonds of our relationship.

## 5. Conclusion

Through an autoethnographic method, this study has provided valuable insights into the formative influences on my primary love languages - *Acts of Service* and *Quality Time*. By examining my own upbringing, I am able to trace the origins of my love preferences back to the ways in which my parents chose to express love for me and my siblings. My parents' predilection for demonstrating affection through helpful actions and shared experiences has clearly left a lasting impact, shaping my own inclinations in how I seek to give and receive love. Furthermore, the process of being in an intimate romantic relationship has also revealed a personal desire for *Physical Touch* as an additional love language. This discovery suggests that while our early familial experiences play a significant role in molding our love language preferences, our adult relationships can also give rise to the need for experiencing love in new and different ways. As we navigate the complexities of human connection, it is essential that we remain open to explore and expand our capacity to both give and receive love, even if certain modalities may not have been prominently featured in our formative years.

The implications of this study highlight the importance of mutual understanding and appreciation of love languages within close relationships. By learning to effectively communicate our own love languages, while also making the effort to accommodate other's preferences, we can foster deeper emotional intimacy and more fulfilling connections. This knowledge can be particularly valuable in both parents–children relationships and romantic partnerships, where the ability to make each other feel truly cherished and cared for is

paramount. However, love languages are deeply personal, and the process of understanding them should also come from experience, observation, and mutual adaptation. While formal knowledge can provide a framework, meaningful change often comes from real-life interactions and willingness to adjust to a partner's or family member's emotional needs. Whether through structured learning or natural experience, what matters most is the genuine effort to recognize and respond to how loved ones give and receive affection.

Furthermore, this understanding can extend beyond just intimate relationships and be applied to various other interpersonal dynamics, such as familial bonds, friendships, and professional collaborations. When we approach all of our relationships with a heightened awareness of love language differences, we are better equipped to navigate potential misunderstandings, resolve conflicts, and cultivate more harmonious and mutually satisfying interactions.

By embracing the autoethnography approach, I aim to create meaningful connections and develop fulfilling romantic relationships. Nevertheless, this study is conducted on my personal experiences, which provides valuable insights into the topic of love languages, so it is important to acknowledge its limitations of potential bias arising from the use of a participant's experiences as the primary source of data. Because autoethnographic research is frequently context-specific and centered on individual experiences, the findings have limited applicability to larger groups or circumstances, as individual preferences and experiences can vary significantly. As a result, if future researchers can balance the benefits and limitations of autoethnography, they can contribute to a more nuanced and contextual understanding of personal experiences when further exploring this topic to provide more authentic results. Further research, incorporating the perspectives of a diverse range of individuals, would be beneficial in corroborating and expanding upon the patterns observed in this study. Additionally, a longitudinal examination of how love language preferences evolve over the course of an individual's life, including the potential influence of significant life events, cultural factors, and societal norms, could yield valuable insights.

In conclusion, this autoethnographic exploration has shed light on the complex and deeply personal nature of love language development. By delving into the formative influences that have shaped my own preferences, I have gained a deeper understanding of the intricate interplay between our early experiences, our adult relationships, and our fundamental need to feel loved and appreciated. As I continue to navigate the human connection, I am committed to fostering an ongoing dialogue around love languages, with the hope of inspiring others to embark on their own journeys of self-discovery and relational growth.

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