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# Unwrapping Transcultural Romantic Love Relationships

Sense of Coherence and  
Identity Development in  
Cultural Perspectives

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# Unwrapping Transcultural Romantic Love Relationships

Sense of Coherence and Identity  
Development in Cultural Perspectives

 Springer

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*Two hearts in love need no words.*

*Marceline Desbordes-Valmore*

*French Poet and Novelist (1786-1859)*

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# Abstract

This study explores the interlinkages of three major themes, namely transcultural romantic relationships, sense of coherence (SOC), and identity development in individuals who are presently involved in romantic relationships with partners from different cultural or ethnic backgrounds. The study uses a qualitative research design within the hermeneutical interpretative research paradigm, aiming at understanding the interlinkages between transcultural romantic relationships, sense of coherence, and identity development. Based on purposive and snowball sampling techniques, the study includes 22 participants (12 female and 10 male) between the ages of 23 and 68, from 14 different (self-defined) cultural backgrounds. At the time of the interview, participants had been in transcultural romantic relationships for at least six months and up to 26 years. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and analysed through content analysis. Qualitative quality criteria and ethical considerations were applied. The findings show that transcultural romantic relationships are firmly based on relationship qualities, strong feelings, common actions, spirituality, and future orientation. Further, the findings present clear interlinkages between transcultural romantic love relationships and sense of coherence, contributing positively to meaningfulness, manageability, and comprehensibility. Finally, transcultural romantic relationships support a sense of coherence on intra- and interpersonal and cultural levels. In addition, they influence the development of identity awareness, actions, feelings, and sexual sense of coherence. Conclusions, limitations, and recommendations for theory and practice are provided.

**Keywords** Romantic love relationships · Transculture, sense of coherence (SOC) · Salutogenesis, identity development · International study · Couples · Transcultural relationships



# Contents

<b>1</b>	<b>Introduction</b> . . . . .	1
1.1	Introducing Love . . . . .	2
1.2	Introducing Salutogenesis . . . . .	2
1.3	Introducing Identity and Its Development . . . . .	3
1.4	Problem Statement, Contribution and Aim of the Study . . . . .	3
1.5	Structure of This Brief . . . . .	4
<b>2</b>	<b>Theoretical Background</b> . . . . .	5
2.1	Love and Transcultural Romantic Love Relationships . . . . .	5
2.2	Sense of Coherence as a Life Orientation . . . . .	7
2.3	Identity and Its Development . . . . .	8
2.4	Integrating the Concepts . . . . .	9
<b>3</b>	<b>Research Methodology</b> . . . . .	11
3.1	Research Design and Paradigm . . . . .	11
3.2	Sample and Sampling Procedure . . . . .	12
3.3	Data Collection . . . . .	12
3.4	Data Analysis and Reporting . . . . .	13
3.5	Qualitative Quality Criteria . . . . .	13
3.6	Ethics and Ethical Considerations . . . . .	14
3.7	Limitations . . . . .	14
<b>4</b>	<b>Findings</b> . . . . .	15
4.1	Demographical and Biographical Data . . . . .	15
4.2	Transcultural Romantic Love Relationships . . . . .	19
4.2.1	Relationship Qualities . . . . .	20
4.2.2	Feelings . . . . .	23
4.2.3	Actions . . . . .	24
4.2.4	Spirituality . . . . .	25
4.2.5	Future . . . . .	25

- 4.3 Sense of Coherence as Life Orientation. . . . . 26
  - 4.3.1 Comprehensibility and Transcultural Romantic Love Relationships . . . . . 29
  - 4.3.2 Manageability and Transcultural Romantic Love Relationships . . . . . 30
  - 4.3.3 Meaningfulness and Transcultural Romantic Love Relationships . . . . . 33
- 4.4 Transcultural Identity Development. . . . . 35
  - 4.4.1 Intrapersonal Identity Development. . . . . 37
- 4.5 Cultural Identity Development. . . . . 38
  - 4.5.1 Intercultural Competence. . . . . 38
- 4.6 Interpersonal Identity Development. . . . . 41
  - 4.6.1 Identity Self-Awareness . . . . . 42
  - 4.6.2 Actions . . . . . 43
  - 4.6.3 Feelings . . . . . 44
  - 4.6.4 Sexual Identity . . . . . 45
- 4.7 Interlinking the Findings . . . . . 46
- 5 Discussion. . . . . 49**
  - 5.1 Transcultural Romantic Love Relationships . . . . . 49
  - 5.2 Sense of Coherence in Transcultural Romantic Love Relationships . . . . . 52
  - 5.3 Identity Development in Transcultural Romantic Love Relationships . . . . . 53
  - 5.4 The Interlinkages of Transcultural Romantic Love Relationships, Sense of Coherence and Identity Development . . . . . 54
- 6 Conclusions, Limitations and Recommendations . . . . . 57**
- References . . . . . 59**

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# List of Tables

Table 4.1	Demographic data . . . . .	16
Table 4.2	Participants and place of residence . . . . .	20
Table 4.3	Romantic love . . . . .	22
Table 4.4	Sense of coherence . . . . .	27
Table 4.5	Identity development . . . . .	36

# Chapter 1

## Introduction



*To love is to surrender all of me for all of you,  
so there is nothing left but us.*

*José Rodríguez*

**Abstract** Chapter 1 provides a short introduction into the brief including first insights into love, salutogenesis and sense of coherence, as well as identity and its development. It further presents the problem statement of the study and explains its contributions and aims.

The complexity and variety of relationships across the world are growing through intercultural and transcultural encounters (Fonseca et al., 2020; Mayer & Vanderheiden, 2021a, 2021b). Couples' romantic relationships have also become an important trans-, inter- and cross-cultural research topic during the past years (Fonseca et al., 2020). Thereby, transcultural relationships are not only defined by the differences in national origins of the individuals encountered, but also by the variances in intersectionality, such as class, race, age, sexuality, culture, religion, and nationality and marital status, education and employment (McKenzie, 2021), and by values and virtues (Kus Ambroz et al., 2021), relationship building capacities, personal and professional strata, places of birth and living, power and ideas about relationship qualities, identity, meaningfulness in life, as well as understanding and managing of the world (Mayer, 2023 in press). The socio-cultural dimension in these relationships plays a predominant role and is strongly connected to meaning-making and identity creation (Mayer, 2011), as well as to concepts of health and well-being, intimacy, and practices and imaginations of quality and stability (Gabb et al., 2014).

Culture and socio-cultural concepts play an important role in the context of relationships and transcultural love relationships and need to be defined as an important concept: culture is a social dimension that can be taught and which involves meaning-making (Mayer, 2011). It can be described as the “coordination of meaning and action within a bounded group” (Bennett, 2017). Individuals who are viewed as “cultural hybrids” form “multiple attachments and identities” (Bell, 1980, p. 243). In transcultural settings and relationships, the group's bounds are

transcended and overcome, referring to the concept of transculturality (Welsch, 1999). Intercultural relationships are defined as relationships that cross-cultural boundaries, while culture is understood as a socio-cultural dimension that involves meaning-making in a way that involves the coordination of meaning and action within a bounded group (Bennett, 2017). Following Welsch (1999), the bounded group's confines in intercultural settings are overcome.

## 1.1 Introducing Love

Love is a complex, fluid concept that changes over time and across societies and cultures, and which has been described in different disciplinary and cultural perspectives (Jankowiak & Nelson, 2021; Mayer & Vanderheiden, 2021a, 2021b; Tenhouten, 2021a). Romantic love, as a specific form of love, is defined as a feeling which includes ecstasy of passion, a boundless desire, a longing for the infinite, and a longing to overcome the finite by escaping bodily limitations and living and loving forever and infinitely (Novak, 2017). With the increasing complexity and diversity of the world, romantic relationships between individuals of different cultural origins and backgrounds are on the rise (Fonseca et al., 2020; Mayer, 2021). These may be termed in this study as transcultural romantic relationships.

## 1.2 Introducing Salutogenesis

Culture and mental health, well-being, and salutogenesis have been increasingly researched during the past decades and scientists have pointed out the interlinkages between culture, mental health, and well-being in terms of culture-specific and inter- and transcultural contexts (Mayer & Viviers, 2014). Further, they have studied concepts of mental health, well-being, and positive psychology and it has been pointed out that these concepts require culture-specific approaches (Qureshi & Evangelidou, 2018).

Traditional health theories focus on pathogenesis, aiming at exploring the origin of diseases to avoid or limit their spread (Becker et al., 2010). As opposed to that, **salutogenesis** is the study of the development of mental health and well-being, which focuses on the positive side of mental health and explores how to eliminate undesirable stressors (Schnyder et al., 2000; Mayer & Krause, 2012; Mayer & Boness, 2013). Salutogenesis, pioneered by the medical sociologist Aaron Antonovsky (1979, 1987) responds to the question of what keeps individuals healthy. The theory falls into the positive psychology paradigm (Mayer, 2011) and thereby overcomes the traditional pathogenic view of focussing on what makes people sick or ill (Antonovsky, 1979), instead focussing on the resources of individuals to become or remain healthy (Bhattacharya et al., 2020; Benz et al., 2014). Salutogenesis also highlights the sense of coherence, a life orientation concept,

which is central to the theory (Mittelmark et al., 2022). It is assumed that a high sense of coherence contributes positively to mental health, well-being, and an increased intercultural competence (Mayer, 2011). However, salutogenesis and sense of coherence studies require further exploration in terms of their impact on different relationships, social systems, and processes (Bauer et al., 2020). So far, it could be pointed out that love positively affects the sense of coherence (Mayer & Oosthuizen, 2020), as well as intercultural competences. However, it has been pointed out that a sense of coherence needs further research and evaluation to foster its understanding, strategies, and interventions in relation to love, resources, coping mechanisms, and personal growth (Mayer & Oosthuizen, 2020). It has been pointed out that love, mental health, and coping relate strongly to issues of identity and how individuals define and see themselves (Bhugra & Becker, 2005; Keupp, 2004), especially after break-ups of romantic relationships (Gillen, 2011).

### **1.3 Introducing Identity and Its Development**

The way individuals define themselves strongly impacts their perceptions and affects their behaviour and relationship building (Erikson, 1950; Kühler, 2021). Identity is viewed as a complex process by which individuals develop a unique view and understanding of themselves (Erikson, 1950). It is the “characteristic trait or personality of a person” and is built on places, perceptions, memories, thoughts, values, and environments that form part of identity as a fluid construct (Hauge, 2007, p. 46). Values play a specific identity-forming role; individuals form an identity based on what and whom they love (Frankfurt, 1999; Kühler, 2021). Identity is usually developed in the context of a sense of place (Griffith et al., 2013; Griffiths & Ooi, 2018) and in transitioning situations, identity concepts are often challenged and/or redefined at least partly (Wendlandt & Rochlen, 2008). Therefore, it has been pointed out that a strong sense of coherence can support the development of identity in terms of comprehensibility, manageability and meaningfulness (Fayad, 2022; Mayer, 2011). Sense of coherence is viewed as an important part of transcultural romantic love relationships, since love is an aspect of identity formation (Frankfurt, 2004, 2006; Kühler, 2021) and part of developing a life orientation.

### **1.4 Problem Statement, Contribution and Aim of the Study**

Previous research has often focused on stressors related to intercultural relationships and on barriers to maintaining them (Bustamante et al., 2011; Herman & Campbell, 2012). However, the present research focuses on transcultural romantic relationships from a positive psychology perspective, exploring sense of coherence and identity development as positive and growth-orientated constructs within diverse cultural contexts. This research, accordingly, addresses the void in the

literature to explore transcultural romantic love relationships (Candey, 2020; Mayer, 2021) in the context of a sense of coherence and identity development research. All three theoretical concepts—love, sense of coherence, and identity development—have been researched extensively, but have seldom been linked or explored in transcultural contexts (Mayer & Vanderheiden, 2021a, 2021b).

The study contributes to the improved complexity in the understanding of the interlinkages between transcultural romantic relationships and sense of coherence as a life orientation fostering health, and to the improved complexity in the understanding of the identity development within transcultural romantic love relationships. The main aim of the study is to explore the interlinkages of transcultural romantic relationships, sense of coherence, and identity development from a qualitative, in-depth research perspective.

The main research question to fulfil the study aim is: *How are transcultural romantic love relationships, sense of coherence, and identity development interlinked?* To respond to the overall research question, the following sub-questions of this research study are explored: (1) *How are transcultural romantic love relationships described?* (2) *How is the orientation in life (sense of coherence) described?* (3) *How is the identity development described?* (4) *How are romantic love relationships, sense of coherence and identity development interlinked?*

The latest definitions and understandings of transcultural romantic love relationships, sense of coherence and identity development and their interlinkages are briefly presented.

## 1.5 Structure of This Brief

In Chap. 1, this brief firstly provides a short introduction into the topics of love, salutogenesis and sense of coherence, as well as identity and its development. It will then present the problem statement of the study and clarify its contribution and aim.

Chapter 2 will provide insights into the topic of love and transcultural romantic love relationships, the sense of coherence as a life orientation, and provide an overview of selected theories on identity and its development. A subchapter will integrate these theoretical topics and the concept of culture. The research methodology will be presented in Chap. 3 and the findings of the study will be presented in Chap. 4. Chapter 5 will discuss the findings of the study in the context of the theories presented in Chap. 2. The final Chap. 6 will provide conclusions, discuss the limitation and give recommendations for theory and practice.



# Chapter 2

## Theoretical Background



**Abstract** Chapter 2 provides insights into love and transcultural romantic love relationships, the sense of coherence as a life orientation, and provides an overview of selected theories on identity and its development. A subchapter will integrate these theoretical topics and the concept of culture.

In this chapter, the theoretical backgrounds of the study, such as love and transcultural romantic relationships, salutogenesis with special regard to sense of coherence as a life orientation and a core concept of salutogenesis, identity and its development, and culture, will be briefly introduced and integrated.

### 2.1 Love and Transcultural Romantic Love Relationships

Love is often viewed as a universal phenomenon (Karandashev, 2015), however, authors such as Lee (1976) or TenHouten (2021a) have argued that it has colourful cultural variations and differentiates itself in patterns of cultural thinking, effects, and behaviour. It seems that almost every culture has produced stories about love and how people fall in and out of love (Lee, 2007; Singer, 2009; Jankowiak & Nelson, 2021).

Love is an act of giving and taking by responding to the needs and well-being of the self and the other, whereas a love relationship is a mature union of two individuals becoming one, yet remaining of two (Fromm, 1956). It is discussed as a positively experienced emotion that might help to transform negative feelings and emotions into more positive ones (Mayer & Vanderheiden, 2021a, 2021b) and may lead individuals to promote the well-being of one another. Romantic love relationships, however, are at least partially erotic or sexually orientated (Friedman, 1998).

Love has seldom been considered a primary emotion, but rather been classified as a secondary emotion, such as in Plutchik (1991, p. 117): “joy + acceptance 1/4 love, friendliness”. Tenhouten (2021a, p.103) has suggested to see love as a

combination of joy and happiness. In his view, love is based on both the joyful acceptance of another person and also the joy of being accepted by another person.

The concept of romantic love has been reinforced in seventeenth century England (Sarsby, 1983) and has, in the Western world, become a primary criterion for selecting marriage partners (Coontz, 2005). Although it was first assumed that the concept of romantic love was a Western construct only, researchers have increasingly reported that romantic relationships exist around various cultures within the world (de Munck, 1996, 2016). Further on, research across cultures has shown over the past decades that love concepts share common attributes across different cultural settings (Coppinger & Rosenblatt, 1968; Karandashev, 2017, 2019; Sternberg & Sternberg, 2019). Lindholm (1998), for example has found that across 248 cultures, 21 had elaborate concepts of romance and were influenced by those in the conceptualisation with marriage. Jankowiak and Nelson (2021) have pointed out that recent studies on love have asked questions that address the universality of romantic love concepts. Thereby, they aim at finding responses to questions, such as, if romantic relationships must be erotic ones; they focus on the differences and similarities of the dynamics of love, the emerging themes around romantic love concepts, and the global rise of companionate marriage.

Individuals across cultures have developed different ways of loving and building romantic love relationships (Soriano-Ayala et al., 2021) and may be distinguished by different love styles (Raffagnino & Puddu, 2018). In certain cultures, intimate love relationships may build the cornerstone of relationship conceptualisations (Kus Ambroz et al., 2021). TenHouten (2019) has pointed out that the concept of romantic love relationships is anchored in the eleventh and twelfth century European courtly life and is connected to passionate love which is intense and often described, as in Jankowiak and Fischer (1992), as universal.

Belsey (1994, p. ix) points out that: “to be in love is to be the protagonist of a story”. Love stories usually follow specific narratives and plots which are culturally determined (Portolan & McAlister, 2022). Thereby the common plot is often described as: “you meet someone, you fall in love, you marry, you have children, you live happily ever after” (Portolan & McAlister, 2022, p. 355). How individuals talk about their love and love relationship creates meaningfulness and often uses the building blocks of events (Abbott, 2008). At the same time, romantic love plots often portray barriers between the protagonists and even a point of ritual death, at which point there might be an experience of conflict or a symbolic end of the relationship (Regis, 2003).

According to Stritof (2020), romantic love relationships go through different developmental phases: (1) infatuation (phase of exhilaration, euphoria and passion usually lasting 6–12 months); (2) disillusionment (phase in which idealisation fades, and a person recognises the problematic aspects of the other); and (3) mature love (transcendence into devotion and long-term relationship based on a deep and meaningful feeling of love).

Falling in love is often accompanied by erotic love, possessiveness and control and often then leads to companionship, commitment and efforts to carry out actions for the loved one (Cowan, 2016). Tenhouten (2021a, p. 108) mentions: “All love

involves happiness and acceptance, but in the process of falling in love the happiness is elevated to an intense joyfulness and one experiences a total acceptance of the other". That does not mean that love does not also have a "dark side", or is ambivalent or accompanied by strong negative feelings at times (Rosenblatt, 2021; Usher, 2008; Tenhouten, 2021b). In couple and long-term relationships, there are likely to be times in which conflict, disapproval, disappointment or feelings of hurt play a role (Frost, 2013; Illouz, 2012; Usher, 2008). Love, care and attachment in love relationships, couples and marriages seem thereby to be influenced by childhood experiences which might be re-enforced and relived during intimate relationships (Rosenblatt, 2021).

In romantic love relationships, individuals experience passion and intimacy (Sternberg, 1997). However, for a relationship to be considered complete or consummate, it needs to be based on, in Western conceptualisations, intimacy, passion and commitment—referred to as the "triangle of love" (Sternberg, 1997). As a result thereof, the concept of intimacy seems to play an important role in romantic relationships and is bound to the cultural concept of meaning-making around love concepts (Trask, 2021). However, researchers have repeatedly highlighted that there are insecurities to which extent socio-cultural values in terms of sexuality, intimacy, partnerships, love or marriage have been adopted by other cultural groups and subgroups all around the world (Hull et al., 2010; Trask, 2021). One trend, however, which seems to be depicted by researchers is that love relationships within global perspectives seem to be increasingly based on romantic and intimate love experiences rather than on social obligation and reproduction and kinship systems (Padilla, 2007). Trask (2021) has further pointed out that very little is known about cross-cultural partnerships, their dynamics, their love concepts, and how they negotiate their short- and long-term relationships. Therefore, this research study focuses on exploring love in Transcultural romantic love relationships and their connection the mental health and well-being and the sense of coherence, as well as intercultural identity development further.

## 2.2 Sense of Coherence as a Life Orientation

Antonovsky (1979) (in Griffith et al., 2011, p. 168) defines a strong sense of coherence as "a global orientation that expresses the extent to which one has a (a) pervasive, enduring, though dynamic feeling of confidence and that stimuli, deriving from one's internal and external environments in the course of living are structured, predictable and explicable; (b) the resources are available to one to offset the demands posed by these stimuli; and (c) these demands are challenges worthy of investment and engagement".

The sense of coherence is defined by its three components: comprehensibility, manageability and meaningfulness (Antonovsky, 1979, 1987). Comprehensibility is the cognitive aspect of sense of coherence, referring to the way in which individuals make sense of and understand the world through the negotiation of internal and

external experiences during their lifetime (Lindmark et al., 2020). Manageability, the behavioural aspect, relates to the individual's confidence in knowing their own resources and activating them when demanded to overcome stressors (Antonovsky, 1987). The third component is motivational (meaningfulness), responding to the question of what makes life meaningful and worth living and to explore whether the challenges encountered are deemed as a worthwhile endeavour (Januszewski, 2011; Lindmark et al., 2020; Mayer, 2011).

The sense of coherence, when strong, may minimise the experience of stressful situations, making stressors tolerable (Braun-Lewensohn & Mayer, 2020) and may promote health and well-being by activating resources and finding solutions to experienced challenges (Lindström & Eriksson, 2006; Vaandrager & Koelen, 2013). A strong sense of coherence thereby assists individuals to marshal resources to manage stressors and change effectively (Mittelmark et al., 2022). Individuals with a high sense of coherence “wish to, are motivated to, cope; believe that challenge is understood; believe that resources to cope are available” (Antonovsky, 1996, p. 15).

### 2.3 Identity and Its Development

Identities are social constructs in constant dynamic processes (Schwarz & Williams, 2020), relating to membership in cultural, religious, ethnic, and social groups (Oyserman & Lee, 2008). Identity is reconstructed through interlinking processes of memory, consciousness and systemic construction, values, upbringing, and relationships (Hauge, 2007; Mayer, 2011), whereby the structure of identity manifests in cognition, behaviour and emotion as the result of socio-cultural development processes (Schwarz & Williams, 2020). Culture influences how one constructs one's identity and forms a cultural identity (Torres et al., 2009). Cultural identity is based on an individual's membership in a specific cultural group (Groh, 2020) which usually goes beyond national belonging and ethnicity (Wan & Chew, 2013). Cultural identities are based on the experiences people have and perceptions that people are shaped by in specific cultural contexts, which influence self-perception (Oyserman & Lee, 2008).

Transcultural identity creation moves beyond the specific cultural group membership and is defined as the process of continuous, fluid, lifelong sense of coherence which supersedes restricted descriptions of selected cultural, racial, or religious backgrounds. Instead, it builds towards a new identity based on various intersectional aspects of identity such as age, gender, or language ability (Mayer & Mayer, 2021a, 2021b; Takhar et al., 2021).

## 2.4 Integrating the Concepts

Interlinking the three major theoretical themes of this study, the following can be highlighted.

*Love* supports coping and might strengthen the individual's sense of coherence (Mayer & Oosthuizen, 2020). The sense of coherence, as a general life orientation and health-promoting resource (Chu et al., 2016), is considered an enabling coping mechanism (Antonovsky, 1979). The higher the sense of coherence, the more a person is able to understand and integrate (comprehensibility), to manage (manageability) and to make sense of an experience or condition (meaningfulness). A high sense of coherence further promotes the potential to successfully cope with stressors (Mayer, 2011; Mittelmark et al., 2022), create positive health outcomes (Eriksson & Lindström, 2006), and achieve transcultural competence (Mayer, 2011) and compassionate love (Mayer & Vanderheiden, 2021a, 2021b). Stronger sense of coherence leads to stronger identity commitments and is related to a higher sense of adulthood in identity formation processes (Luyckx et al., 2008). However, identity development, sense of coherence and love have been scarcely researched and need further exploration (Mayer & Vanderheiden, 2021a, 2021b).

The sense of coherence is strengthened through love (Moksnes, 2021) and a positive and constructive identity development, and vice versa (Mayer, 2011; Mayer & Boness, 2009). This happens by matching individual and contextual expectations and increased understanding of self and others (comprehensibility), increased coping mechanisms (manageability) and an increased sense-making (meaningfulness). A high sense of coherence contributes to a positive, constructive, complex and integrative transcultural identity development, while a low sense of coherence impacts negatively on a transcultural identity development and reduces the identity towards a less complex and stereotyped identity (Mayer & Mayer, 2021b).

Identity development happens in three realms—love, work, and worldview—while people engage in different life decisions (Arnett, 2000). Romantic love relationships contribute to the development of shared identities, called unions or fusions (Merino, 2004), and which are built upon the desire to create a “we”-based union (Helm, 2017). They relate to Plato's philosophy that individuals are essentially “in search of their missing half”, aiming to fuse their identities (Merino, 2004, p. 123). Shared identities are communities of interest that dissolve the boundaries between lovers (Friedman, 1998), constructing common interests, unity (Helm, 2017) and “ontological dependence” as the source of romantic relationships' virtues (Friedman, 1998). Merino (2004) speaks of a fully shared identity which occurs when the origins of the perceptions, feelings and actions of individuals are perceived to come from the shared identity. It is a union of individuals (Kühler, 2021) concerned with the interests of the other, care and protection, deep mutual familiarity, attention, common decision-making, division of labour, mutual awareness, reflection of the self-concept and convergence of long-term plans (Friedman, 1998). Romantic relationships usually lead to highly fused identities (Friedman, 1998) with the dialectical experience between autonomy and independence (Solomon, 1988).

# Chapter 3

## Research Methodology



**Abstract** The research methodology will be presented in Chap. 3. The chapter displays the study’s research design, strategy and approach and gives information on the samples and the sampling process, the collection and analysis of data, the limitations, as well as the ethical approach and quality criteria.

The research methodology applied in this study is explained in terms of research design, paradigm approach and strategy, sample and sampling procedures, data collection and analysis, qualitative standard criteria, ethical considerations, and methodological limitations.

### 3.1 Research Design and Paradigm

The study uses a qualitative research design within the hermeneutical interpretative research paradigm (Dilthey, 1990; Zimmerman, 2015). The interpretivist research paradigm assumes that reality is built upon various ways of seeing the world. Interpretivism aims at exploring and understanding those different, subjective, and sometimes ambiguous world views (Ponterotto, 2005).

This research aims at understanding the described phenomena from a holistic and complex perspective. It uses a hermeneutical approach to create an understanding of the subjective worlds (Flick, 2018) while focusing on the hermeneutical inquiry which moves towards creating an understanding of the narrative of the individual and the experiences described and explained in these narratives (Lopez & Willis, 2004). Qualitative research methods are used to explore the content of the narrations in a holistic manner (Foster, 2019), referencing the hermeneutical cycle which puts emphasis on the construction of meaning through reflection on the data collected (Whitehead, 2004). This process was employed in the study to increase the understanding of the interlinkages of transcultural romantic relationships, sense of coherence and identity development.

## 3.2 Sample and Sampling Procedure

The study used purposive and snowball sampling techniques (Etikan, Musa, & Alkassim, 2016b; Naderifar et al., 2017). Purposive sampling draws on individuals who are expected to provide the most useful information for the study and who are selected based on their experiences with the research topic (Patton, 2015; Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011). Individuals who are recruited by already existing participants of the study are recruited through snowball sampling (Etikan, Alkassim & Abubakar, 2016a). Both sampling techniques were used in this study.

Altogether, 22 individuals were recruited to participate in the study. Individuals that were sampled had to (1) be over the age of 18 years; (2) be English speaking; and (3) at the time of interviewing, be in transcultural romantic relationships, meaning that participants defined themselves as being in a romantic relationship with a partner of different ethnic, cultural, national, or language background.

## 3.3 Data Collection

For data collection, qualitative research methods were used. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, which included questions relating to demographic details of age, sex, highest education level, profession, occupation, cultural background, first language, second language, place of birth, country of origin, country of residence, romantic relationship since, cultural background of the partner, first and second language of the partner, place of birth, country of origin and residence of the partner.

The questionnaire contained questions on the three topics of sense of coherence, identity development and transcultural romantic love relationships, such as:

- Please describe your orientation to life; what makes your life and partnership meaningful? How do you manage life and partnership? How do you understand your partnership?
- Who are you? What were the most important developments in your life and in your transcultural relationship?
- What is a transcultural romantic love relationship for you? What are the feelings and symbols involved?

Altogether 25 questions were posed in the semi-structured interview questionnaire. Interviews were conducted online, orally, or in writing, according to the interviewee's preference. The interviewees received the questionnaire and explanations as well as consent and information forms before the interview. Most of the interviewees preferred to respond to the questions in writing rather than in oral online interviews. The interviews that were conducted orally were not recorded and transcribed verbatim, but the researcher took notes during the interviews and wrote down the responses. In the other instances, the participants wrote their responses to

the questionnaire. The reasons given for this preference were: they wanted to think about the questions and respond to them when they had time; they wanted to fill in the questionnaire over a longer period (not in one session); they did not want to expose themselves to private questions in an oral interview session, but were willing to participate in writing; and they wanted to remain completely anonymous and unknown to the researcher.

### **3.4 Data Analysis and Reporting**

The qualitative data was analysed using the five-step process of content analysis as described by Terre Blanche, Durrheim and Kelley (2006, pp. 322–326). These steps are as follows: (1) familiarisation and immersion, (2) inducing themes, (3) coding, (4) elaboration and (5) interpretation and checking. This content analysis process has been successfully used in previous qualitative research, is easy to conduct and at the same time offers a very structured way to analyse large quantities of qualitative data.

The data are reported in a qualitative reporting style by presenting the themes, categories and codes while incorporating direct quotations from the interviews conducted (Løkkeberg et al., 2020). The presentation and interpretation of the quotations lead to an increased in-depth understanding of the content of the research (Løkkeberg et al., 2020).

### **3.5 Qualitative Quality Criteria**

In this study, qualitative quality criteria were used to establish rigour (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The qualitative research criteria of credibility, transferability, dependability and conformability were applied to establish trustworthiness of the research study (Whitehead, 2004; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The following briefly explains how these quality criteria were established in this study.

Credibility was established through the truthful collection, explanation and interpretation of the findings that were narrated by the participants (Whitehead, 2004) and by the intersubjective validation processes (Yin, 2018) which included the constant revision of analysing the data by redefining codes, categories and themes within the frame of the given topic.

In terms of dependability, the researcher followed the described research steps and thereby guaranteed insights into and transparency of the process and the conclusions drawn from the research findings (Korstjens & Moser, 2018). This created reliable and consistent findings.

Further, the researcher aimed to establish transferability, which refers to the idea that similar findings can be replicated based on this study. Therefore, the research



process was carefully described and explained in detail, consequently ensuring the study's transferability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Finally, conformability refers to the trustworthiness of the study and its findings in the context of verification of findings through other studies (Forero et al., 2018). In this study, the findings and conclusions are interlined and provide transparency of the research process and its documentation through the steps conducted (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

### **3.6 Ethics and Ethical Considerations**

This research project received ethics approval from the University of Northumbria in Newcastle, UK. The researcher applied ethical principles, such as non-maleficence (inflicting no harm to the participants), beneficence (doing good and benefiting the participants) and respect for the participants and their ideas, thoughts and statements. The participants voluntarily took part in the study and had the right to withdraw at any time (Smythe & Murray, 2000). All participants were informed about the research and its aims and they were given informed consent (Connelly, 2014). The research further adhered to confidentiality and guaranteed anonymity to the participants (Wiles et al., 2008; Connelly, 2014). All conclusions drawn in this research study were drawn from the data (Walker, 2007) and the research was conducted transparently and honestly.

### **3.7 Limitations**

This study is limited to a qualitative methodological research approach and is therefore not generalisable, but rather provides a unique and in-depth insight into the subjective views of the participants (Toomela, 2011). The study is limited to the interviews of 22 individuals from selected cultural backgrounds. It needs to be highlighted that the findings might carry a bias, in that 6 of the 22 participants came from a German cultural background and the majority of participants are highly educated. Altogether 20 of the 22 participants hold a university degree (from bachelor to doctorate level). It is possible that this might create a bias in the findings, for instance regarding values, value sets and practices such as self-reflection. Finally, research bias may influence the findings (Schaefer & Alvesson, 2020) since they are interpreted by a bicultural (German–South African), female, middle-aged researcher from a middle-class background and a high educational standard holding several university degrees.

# Chapter 4

## Findings



**Abstract** The findings of the study are presented in Chap. 4. This chapter shows the participants' responses in terms of the aims and research questions on love, salutogenesis and sense of coherence, identity and its development.

The findings refer to three major themes: (1) Transcultural romantic relationships; (2) Life orientation and sense of coherence and (3) Identity development. The findings answer the main research questions and sub-questions, as stated above. First, selected biographical data will be presented. Thereafter, findings are presented in response to the research questions, in chronological order and in a qualitative reporting style.

### 4.1 Demographical and Biographical Data

In this study, 22 participants were interviewed with regard to their experiences in transcultural romantic relationships, their sense of coherence and their identity development. The age of the participants ranged from 23 to 68 years. In all, 12 female and 10 male participants with different cultural backgrounds were interviewed (Table 4.1).

The educational background of the participants varied in terms of their highest degree from a high school diploma (3<sup>1</sup>), to ABD (obtaining research doctorate) (1), Honours (1), Bachelor's degree (3), Master's degree (8), and Doctorate or PhD (6). At the time of the interviews, the participants were working as a director (1), businessman (1), teacher (2), academic (6), medical doctor (1), interculturalist (1), engineer/technician (4), secretary (1), data analyst (1), tailor (1), manager (1), web designer (1) and student (1). As to cultural background, two individuals mentioned that they had a bicultural background, while 20 individuals were raised monoculturally, meaning in one country. In terms of their cultural origin, the

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<sup>1</sup>The number in parentheses indicates the number of statements in the category.

**Table 4.1** Demographic data

No.	Age	Sex	Highest education	Profession	Occupation	Cultural background	First language	Second language	Place of birth	Country of origin	Country of residence	In romantic relationship since	Cultural background of the partner	First language of the partner	Second language of the partner	Place of birth of the partner	Country of origin of the partner	Country of residence of the partner
1	61	f	Master degree	Director	Pedagogue, Literary scholar, Theologian, Independent Researcher	Mother German, Father Dutch, born and raised in Germany	German	English	Aachen	Germany	Germany	2014	Indian	Hindi	English	Bhopal	Indian	Indian
2	68	m	High school	Businessman	Manager	White man	English	Spanish	Eureka, California	USA	USA	1996	Argentina	Spanish	English	Argentina	Argentina	USA
3	46	f	Master degree	Teacher and human rights activist	House wife	European	Romanian	English	Romania	Romania	Ethiopia	August 2021	African	Amharic	English	Ethiopia	Ethiopia	Ethiopia
4	46	f	Doctorate	Academic	Academic	German	German	English	Germany	Germany	South Africa	June 2021	US-American	English	Spanish	USA	USA	USA (but grew up for many years in Mexico as a child)
5	24	f	Bachelor	Teacher of German and English	Teacher of German and English (Master)	Russian	Russian	German	Novosibirsk, Russia	Russia	Germany	2019	German	German	English	Regensburg, German	Germany	Germany
6	32	f	Doctorate	Doctor	Doc. In paediatrics	German	German	English	Braunschweig, Germany	Germany	Germany	2014	Italian	Italian	-	Florence, Tuscany	Italy	Germany
7	37	m	PhD	Associate Professor	Associate Professor	Asian, 100% Japanese	Japanese	English	Japan	Japan	UK	2004	European Dutch	Dutch	English	Netherlands	Netherlands	UK

No.	Age	Sex	Highest education	Profession	Occupation	Cultural background	First language	Second language	Place of birth	Country of origin	Country of residence	In romantic relationship since	Cultural background of the partner	First language of the partner	Second language of the partner	Place of birth of the partner	Country of origin of the partner	Country of residence of the partner
8	81	m	ABD	Inter-culturalist	Counselor (11 years), Professor (13 years), consultant (35 years)	JAPAN, USA, HAWAII, CHRISTIAN, WHITE, DISABLED, HIGHLY EDUCATED, MALE, I.E., MULTI-CULTURAL	English	Japanese	Atlanta, Georgia	USA	Japan	2000	JAPANESE, USA-HAWAII, FEMALE, MID-AGED, CHRISTIAN, HIGHLY EDUCATED, ABLED, MULTI-CULTURAL	Japanese	English	Toyama, Japan	Japan	Japan
9	54	f	PhD	Teach and research	University Adjunct Faculty	Japanese	Japanese	English	Japan	Japan	Japan	2000	White	English	Japanese	USA	USA	Japan
10	47	m	PhD	Engineer	Professor	German	German	English	Germany	Germany	Germany	1998	South African—Coloured	English	Afrikaans	South Africa (PE)	SA	Germany
11	28	f	Honour Degree	Student	Student	Coloured	English	Afrikaans	Johannesburg, Gauteng	South Africa	South Africa	2017	SeSotho	SeSotho	English	Ondendaarsrus, Free State	South Africa	South Africa
12	31	m	Bachelor	Junior Technician	Junior Technician	Bangladeshi	Bengali	English	Mymensingh, Bangladesh	Bangladesh	Negeri Sembilan, Malaysia	2016	Bengali	Bengali	English	Dhaka, Bangladesh	Dhaka, Bangladesh	Dhaka, Bangladesh
13	28	f	Master	Researcher	Graduate Research Assistant	Malay	Malay language	English	Kelantan, Malaysia	Kelantan, Malaysia	Negeri Sembilan, Malaysia	2016	Bengali	Bengali	English	Dhaka, Bangladesh	Dhaka, Bangladesh	Dhaka, Bangladesh
14	26	m	Master	Website developer	Website manager for a private company	Iranian	Farsi	English	Tehran	Iran	Iran	2019	American	English	French	Los Angeles	USA	USA, France, Iran
15	30	f	Master	Researcher	Researcher	German	German	English	Hannover, Germany	Germany	Germany	2020 (February)	Indian	English	Malayalam	Trivandrum, India	India	Germany
16	35	M	Masters In Informatik	Data Scientist	Research Assistant	Malay	English	Malayalam	Kerala, India	India	Germany	2020	-	German	English	Hannover	Germany	Germany

(continued)

**Table 4.1** continued

No.	Age	Sex	Highest education	Profession	Occupation	Cultural background	First language	Second language	Place of birth	Country of origin	Country of residence	In romantic relationship since	Cultural background of the partner	First language of the partner	Second language of the partner	Place of birth of the partner	Country of origin of the partner	Country of residence of the partner
17	29	F	Master of Arts	Tourism Management	Project Manager in Tourism research	German	German	English	Saarbrücken-Dudweiler	Germany	Germany	November 2021	Moroccan-Berber	Moroccan, French	English	Mohammedia Morrocon	Germany	Germany
18	23	F	High school Diploma	Tailor	Tailor in a workshop	Afghan	Farsi	Pashto	Mashhad, Iran	Iran	Iran (temporary residence)	2020	Iranian	Farsi	English	Tehran	Iran	Iran
19	42	M	Doctoral degree	Educational leadership, intercultural and language education	Assistant Professor	Ankara, raised in Aegean, studied in Canada, lived in Japan since 2006	Turkish	English and Japanese	Ankara	Turkey	Japan	Married, but not in love, talks about previous relationship	Japanese	Japanese	Low English	Tokyo	Japan	Japan
20	26	M	Bachelor of Science	Software Engineer	MA student and Data analyst (Part Time)	Moroccan, Berber	Moroccan (Darija), French	English	Mohammedia, Morocco	Morocco	Germany	Nov 2021	German	German	English	Saarbrücken-Dudweiler (Germany)	Germany	Germany
21	25	F	High school diploma	Secretary in a private office	Secretary in a private office	Iranian	Farsi	English	Res. a suburb of Teheran	Iran	Iran	2019	Afghan	Pashto	Farsi (fluent)	Herat (Afghanistan)	Afghanistan	Iran
22	29	M	Master degree	Industrial Engineer	Dairy Plant Manager	Arab	Arabic	Farsi	Ahwaz	Iran	Iran	2017	Persian	Farsi	English and Elementary Arabic	Tehran	Iran	Iran

following were mentioned: German (6), White (1), European (1), Russian (1), Japanese (2) USA (1), Coloured (1), Bangladesh (1), Malay (2), Iranian (2), Afghan (1), Turkish (1), Moroccan (1), Arab (1). The participants have the following nationalities: German (6), USA (2), Romanian (1), Russian (1), Japanese (2), South African (1), Bangladeshi (1), Malay (2), Iranian (3), Afghan (1), Turkish (1), Moroccan (1). The first language the participants spoke was German (6), English (4), Romanian (1), Russian (1), Japanese (2), Bengali (1), Malay (1), Farsi (3), Turkish (1), Darija (1), Arabic (1). The second languages spoken were English (15), Spanish, (1) German (1), Japanese (1), Afrikaans (1), Malayan (1), Pashto (1) and Farsi (1).

The participants had been in their transcultural romantic love relationships for different durations, from 26 years at the time of the interview, (1996, 1) followed by 24 years (1998, 1), 22 years (2000, 2), 18 years (2004, 1), 8 years (2014, 2), 6 years (2016, 2), 5 years (2017, 2), 3 years (2019, 3), 2 years (2020, 3) and 6–12 months (2021, 4).

With regard to belonging to different cultural backgrounds and language groups, the participants were in different transcultural romantic love relationships, as indicated in the following:

German (f<sup>2</sup>)—Indian (m), Romanian (f)—Ethiopian (m), USA (m)—Argentine (f), German (f)—USA (m), Russian (f)—German (m), German (f)—Italian (m), Japanese (m)—Dutch (f), USA (m)—Japanese (f), Japanese (f)—USA (m), German (m)—South African (f), Bengali, Malaysia (m)—Bengali, Bangladesh (f), Malay (f)—Bengali (m), Iranian (m)—USA (m), German (f)—Indian (m), Indian (m)—German (f), German (f)—Moroccan (m), Afghan, Iran (f)—Farsi, Iran (m), Turkish (m)—Japanese (f), Moroccan (m)—German (f), Farsi, Iran (f)—Afghan, Iran (m), Arab, Iran (m)—Persian. Iran (f).

## 4.2 Transcultural Romantic Love Relationships

Participants answered the question what transcultural romantic love relationships meant to them by defining them according to the following five categories: relationship quality (54<sup>3</sup>), feelings (32), actions (17), spirituality (9) and future (7) (Table 4.2).

With regard to the country of residence of the partners, it can be highlighted that participants represented a variety of residence models (as shown in Table 4.2). Findings show that a majority of participants are living in the country of residence of the partner (9). About 5 participants have their partners living in their own country. Three individuals live with their partners in a third country. Three

<sup>2</sup>f indicates female, m indicates male—no other gender categories were mentioned by the participants.

<sup>3</sup>Numbers in parentheses refer here to the total number of responses given in the interviews mentioning this code with regard to the specific theme and category.

**Table 4.2** Participants and place of residence

Participant and place of residence situation	Participant	Total numbers
Participant is living in the country of residence of the partner	P3, P5, P8, P12, P13, P16, P17, P19, P21	9
Partner is living in the country of residence of the participant	P2, P6, P9, P10, P15	5
Partners living together in a third country (different country from the participant and the partner of origin)	P4, P7, P20	3
Partners living in the same home country, but belong to two different ethnic and/or language groups	P11, P18, P22	3
Long-distance relationship with different countries of residence of the participant and the partner	P1, P14	2

participants live with their partners in the same country they both come from; however, they were born into two different cultural or ethnic subgroups of the society. Finally, two participants live in long-distance relationships with their partners in two different countries of residence. In this case they only visit each other occasionally.

In the following, selected findings—the ones mentioned most and least frequently—are presented in a qualitative reporting style and together with directly quoted extracts of the interviews as examples. Table 4.3 shows that in terms of romantic relationships, participants highlight specific aspects which are important to them, such as relationship qualities, feelings, actions, spirituality and future. These important love relationship categories are defined by different sub-categories or codes which describe them in more detail.

Most frequently, relationship qualities that define transcultural love relationships are mentioned, followed by different feelings and actions, spirituality, and the description of the future. These categories will be described in the following in more depth and with examples.

### 4.2.1 *Relationship Qualities*

Participants highlighted that transcultural romantic relationships are built on specific relationship qualities which predominantly include the concept of care (8), sexual attraction (7), closeness (6), unity (or being an “enclosed unit” as a couple) (5), supporting each other (5), intimacy (4) and acceptance (4). Besides these, sincerity, kindness, and calmness were mentioned twice. Other relationship qualities such as commitment, longing, personal growth, understanding, forgiveness, openness, peacefulness, value, reliability and equality were mentioned once.

P2, a 68-year-old male US participant who is married to an Argentinian wife described various relationship qualities. He further explains what transcultural romantic love relationships fundamentally mean to him:

Someone that cares at least as much about me as they care about themselves. Someone who listens, someone who cares if you are upset, someone who is willing to compromise to get along, but not give up what they believe. Someone who is willing to confront when necessary. Someone who is willing to fight for the relationship.

Someone who is kind when I don't necessarily deserve is, someone who is calm when I am angry... someone who... thinks of me first—like I think of them first... someone who is willing to forgive me, someone I am willing to forgive... someone who is willing to say they are sorry, even when they are not wrong. Someone who is willing to accept me as I am and not try to change me, someone who loves me and respects me. Someone that I love and respect. Someone who is an equal and not willing to play second fiddle... someone who loves peace.

For this participant, transcultural romantic love relationships are built on the interaction with the partner and their care for each other on different levels. He describes a “perfect fit” and the balancing out of actions (angry calm) which are based on mutual care, respect and love in combination with humbleness.

P15, a German 30-year-old female participant who is in a transcultural romantic love relationship with an Indian male partner, also mentioned various relationship qualities, such as care and attraction, which play an outstanding role for her in defining the relationship. For her, transcultural romantic love relationships mean:

The feeling that you care immensely about another (read “the other”) person, their well-being and their success in life/contentedness with life (that they're happy—within the relationship but also in general); that you feel attracted to that person (physically but also in a mental connection kind of way); that you are there for each other, respect each other and that you work on each other's problems together, shared or otherwise.

The meaning of transcultural romantic relationships was quite complex for the participants and, as in this example, related to a common definition of meaning in life and happiness, attraction, mental connection, respect and common problem solving. It not only involved care and attraction, but also a very strong interpersonal quality of belonging to each other.

P20, a 26-year-old male Moroccan participant who is living with his German girlfriend in Germany, commented:

First, we became friends. At that time, I learned that she was emotionally unavailable since she had just ended her last relationship. So, ... we kept hanging out; it started by going on a picnic, then just to talk or go on walks, then we kept meeting to carry out our university work. Little by little, we grew closer to each other... We feel close to the point that we can talk about anything, strengthening our communication and trust towards one another.

Relationship qualities develop and grow during the time of being together and learning from each other. They are the in-depth qualities that are making romantic relationships even deeper and more intimate and unique in comparison to other relationships. These relationships are extremely complex and are also bound to specific feelings which develop over time. In this example, the Moroccan partner described how the relationship developed from a friendship and the spending of



**Table 4.3** Romantic love

Category	Participants	Total
<b>Relationship qualities 54</b>		
Care	2,5,6,12,13,15,16,20	8
Sexual attraction	3,7,12,15,16,17,19	7
Closeness	1,2,4,12,19,20	6
Endorsed unit /unity	2,4,12,13,18,20	5
Being there for the other / mutual support	5,9,13,15,16,18,20	5
Intimacy	1,2,12,19	4
Acceptance	2,5,13,20	4
Sincerity	5,18	2
Kindness	2,4	1
Calmness	2,10	2
Commitment	5	1
Longing	7	1
Personal growth	6	1
Understanding	13	1
Forgiveness	2	1
Openness	8	1
Peacefulness	2	1
Value	18	1
Reliability	9	1
Equality	2	1
<b>Feelings 32</b>		
Love	2,3,5,6,13,20	6
Happiness	1,3,4,5,15	5
Trust	5,8,9,12,20,	5
Respect	2,5,7,8,15	5
Deepest, unique feelings	3,7,11,15,19	5
Balance	2,18	2
Excitement	4,7	2
Emotional satisfaction	18	1
Safety	7	1
Feeling alive	1	1
<b>Actions 17</b>		
Fight (for relationship)	2,4,12,13,19,	4
Listen	2,5,13	3
Confront	2,13	2
Discuss and negotiate	1,13	2
Communicate	20	1
Keep standpoint	2	1
Compromise	2	1
Keep boundary	16	1
Build enterprise	4	1

**Table 4.3** (continued)

Category	Participants	Total
Apologise	2	1
<b>Spirituality 9</b>		
Soul, body, spirit (spiritually) connection	4,9,12,15,17,19	6
Warmth of soul	5,20	2
Transcendence	13	1
<b>Future 7</b>		
Mutual development	1,4,6	3
Common future	4,18	2
Living one's dream together	4	1
Partner for life	8	1

time together towards closeness and trust. To be able to start a romantic love relationship, the partners need to be “available” and willing to open up and share their inner feelings, thoughts and concerns.

### 4.2.2 Feelings

Transcultural romantic love relationships also need to involve particular feelings according to the respondents, such as love (6). Love was mentioned as the most important and frequent feeling in romantic love relationships. Each of the following feelings was named five times: happiness, trust, respect, and deepest, unique feelings (5 each). Further, balance and excitement were each mentioned twice (2 each), and feelings of emotional satisfaction, safety and feeling alive were mentioned once (1 each).

P6, a German, 32-year-old female doctor who is going out with an Italian doctor, living with him in Germany, commented on the special feelings that the transcultural romantic love relationship includes:

Feeling love for each other and being loving with each other. Creating a team which plays together in this life. In the beginning it was more electricity, excitement, mystery and attraction. Then there has been an episode of fury and disappointment. Once again love and growing trust. After a couple of years there were two phases where my feelings were less intense and I felt more distanced. And then, again my feeling turned more intense, but the love got calmer, there was a loving, a familiar and trustful feeling.

This participant described the changes in the feelings she experienced in her relationship over the past 8 years. Starting off with excitement and electricity, mystery and attraction, the relationship moved towards love and trust. However, the participant also described the up and downs in her relationship with growing love on the one hand and feelings of anger, disappointment and distance on the other hand. Managing these ups and downs is part of growing together.

A 24-year-old Russian female teacher living in Germany (P5), who is in a relationship with a German partner for 3 years, referred to freedom and happiness as important aspects of her relationship:

My partner is a person with whom I want to be close without a doubt. With whom I feel comfortable and free, with whom I am happy and to whom I bring happiness.

Again, closeness, happiness and comfortability are important aspects within the relationship.

P19, a Turkish, 42-year-old male living with his Japanese girlfriend in Tokyo, referred in the interview to the depth and unique aspects of his relationship and the effort he made just to be with her:

I define romantic love as the deepest, most primitive, powerful, and genuine affection that originates through pure human interactions. The words pure and primitive are important here as humans know more about each other, I feel romantic love starts to fade because you start to recognise the other person is no longer pure and they have their own agendas. It is almost impossible to keep it a hundred per cent pure forever ... I worked graveyard shifts in a bakery factory ... in Toronto, to be able to save enough money and move to Tokyo with her. I felt like I could do everything for her.

The strong feelings of P19 for his girlfriend were transformed directly into actions. He described the powerful feelings which love can set free in a person and he explains how much he worked for just being able to be and live with her. Love, according to this participant, can set free lots of energy and actions when partners want to be together and strive for the common aim of building a relationship together.

### 4.2.3 *Actions*

In 17 of the responses, the participants of the study mentioned that their transcultural romantic love relationship is built on certain actions such as fighting for the relationship (4), listening to the other (3), confronting as well as discussing (2) and negotiating with each other (2). Finally, communication, keeping the standpoint, compromise, keeping the boundary, building enterprise and apologising were each mentioned once (1).

P13, a 28-year-old Malay female participant, explained that in her relationship with a Bengali man, her expectations regarding her relationship were more than she had ever expected:

Being in love with my husband is totally beyond my thoughts and expectations. It is something that I thought really impossible to happen since we are from different culture, race and also different country. However, being in love with each other make us stronger together to fight for our love and overcome all the difficulties.

P13 narrated how the couple had to fight for their transcultural relationship during the interview. Thereby, the couple had primarily to fight against their concerns of their family of origin who did not accept their transcultural relationship. The

participant explained that their deep feeling of love helped them to overcome all the difficulties and still does. Their love gives them strength. Another important aspect of this love is their faith and spirituality that brought the two together, as shown in the next sub-chapter.

#### **4.2.4 Spirituality**

With regard to nine of the responses, participants of the study noted that spirituality played a significant role in their transcultural romantic relationships. For respondents, the concept of spirituality included a connection in body and spirit that they experience with their partner. Two respondents referred to a “warmth of soul” when they talk about spirituality and one person referred to the experience of transcendence as a part of their relationship reality.

For P9, for example a Japanese female participant who has been married to her US-American husband for the past 22 years, the spiritual connection to him builds a major part of their transcultural love relationship:

“We are spiritually connected and support each other”.

Further, P4, a German 46-year-old female participant emphasised that it was the “warmth of the soul” that attracted her to her US-American boyfriend. Several of the participants, such as P13, a Malay 28-year-old woman, spoke of the importance of “transcendence” in their relationship which she connected to her faith and spirituality. The category of spirituality is mentioned in the dataset by female participants only. None of the male participants referred to faith, spirituality or spiritual connection to their partners as majorly important.

#### **4.2.5 Future**

Finally, findings show that transcultural romantic relationships also need to have a future orientation (7). Three respondents emphasised the need to see a mutual development within their relationship. They are of the opinion that they need to have an idea of a common future together. Two respondents mentioned that they needed to build an idea of a common future within their relationship to make it work. One respondent highlighted the wish to live her dreams with her partner, and another respondent needed to see her partner as a partner for life. It seems that especially in transcultural relationships, it is important for the participants to have an idea and understanding where the relationship is going. This does seem to be quite important, because partners in transcultural relationships often need to make an effort to be and live together, such as moving countries or being able to stay in a country that they are not born in. The transcultural relationship might be seen as a motivational factor of staying in a certain country or culture which goes against individuals’ expectations on a long-term basis. Therefore, transcultural love relationships might need

more effort from the partners to stay together than relationships in which both partners come from the same cultural and country background.

P4, a German 46-year-old female academic who has been in a relationship with her boyfriend for 6 months, explained that constructing a future together was very important to her:

My romantic relationship only started six months ago. I fell in love with my neighbour who moved into my complex where I live with my kids. The relationship became really meaningful to me, because I can share parts of my life, my dreams, my desires with my partner. I can live my ways of caring, my sharing of thoughts and feelings and my dreams of the future (they might be different from my partner's dreams), but at least I can share them.

Here, the transcultural romantic relationship is connected to the future in terms of planning, thoughts, dreams and fulfilling desires. The vision of being together in future and living a life together is part of a meaningful relationship for this participant, not in the least because she has children and needs to plan her life in the context of her family relationships.

### 4.3 Sense of Coherence as Life Orientation

The findings present 154 statements concerning the life orientation and sense of coherence of the respondents (see Table 4.4). These statements, when categorised according to the sense of coherence components of comprehensibility, manageability and meaningfulness show that participants' transcultural romantic love relationships are deeply connected with meaning-making and their meaningfulness in life. Eighty-three responses dealt with meaningfulness, 52 with manageability, and 21 with comprehensibility. This shows that participants primarily focused on the meaning of their love relationship in their lives. This was followed by the manageability aspect and how their relationship supported them in managing their life. Finally, the love relationship also increased their comprehensibility of themselves, their partner and their world around them. Based on the frequencies, however, the most important aspect was the meaning and meaningfulness that participants experienced based on their transcultural romantic love relationship. The following sections show in detail how participants relate the three components to their transcultural romantic love relationships.

**Table 4.4** Sense of coherence

SOC	Identity codes	Participants	Total
<b>Sense of meaningfulness</b>			<b>83</b>
<i>Interpersonal meaningfulness creation</i>			<b>25</b>
	Relationships	1,2,3,4,5,11,12,13,16,18,19,20	12
	Care	4,15,16,17	4
	Get to know each other	2,3,13	3
	Do things	4,13	2
	Share dreams	4,13	2
	Compliments	1,3	2
<i>Positive feelings</i>			<b>21</b>
	Love makes life meaningful	1,2,3,5,6,8,16	7
	Longing/passion	1,3,4,17,19	5
	Enjoy life/happiness	4,5,8,13,17	5
	Positive effect	2,5,11	3
	Tenderness	1	1
<i>Intrapersonal meaningfulness creation</i>			<b>17</b>
	Develop myself	1,2,3,4,5,6,8,13,17	9
	Be who you are	1,2,5,14,17,20	6
	Experience inner peace	1,8	2
<i>Spirituality</i>			<b>11</b>
	God-Faith	2,3,9,13	4
	Gratefulness	2,4,12,13	4
	Meaningful purpose	6,13,17	3
<i>Others</i>			<b>9</b>
	Career	11,16	2
	Change residence	8,10	2
	Health	5,7	2
	Hobby	16	1
	Family	11	1
	Kids	11	1
<b>Sense of manageability</b>			<b>50</b>
<i>Manage the relationship through action</i>			<b>25</b>
	Talk	4, 5,13,19	4

(continued)

**Table 4.4** (continued)

SOC	Identity codes	Participants	Total
	Transform negative into positive	2,4,5,13	4
	Praying (divine support)	1,2,3, 13	4
	Listen	5,13,19	3
	Convince family	13,16,18	3
	Move to third country to be equal	15,18	2
	Stay with her in her country	10	1
	Help people	2	1
	Being monogamous	1	1
<b><i>Manage the relationship through values and ideas</i></b>			<b>25</b>
	Care for the other	1,2,3,4,6,13,16,19	8
	Create similar values / third culture	1,4,5,13,18	5
	Build relationship	2,6,13,15	4
	Appreciate/respect others	6,13,15,16	4
	Accept turns and twists	5,13	2
	Openness	5,13	2
	Share goals	19	1
	Wishing was from same culture	11	1
<b>Sense of comprehensibility</b>			<b>21</b>
<b><i>Increased or revised understanding of the world</i></b>			<b>14</b>
	World makes sense	1,4,11	3
	Make the world better	1,2,11	3
	Learn from others	3,7,15	3
	People are good	1,5,11	3
	Unconditional love	5, 7	2
<b><i>Increased or revised self-understanding</i></b>			<b>7</b>
	Self-reflection	1,2,4,7,11	5
	Christianity	4,11	2

### ***4.3.1 Comprehensibility and Transcultural Romantic Love Relationships***

Participants felt that their transcultural romantic love relationships generally influenced their understanding of themselves, their partners and/or their world around them positively. Accordingly, the findings show an increased or revised understanding of the world (system) and/or an expanded or revised self-understanding.

#### **4.3.1.1 Increased or Revised Understanding of the World**

Three individuals each highlighted that their transcultural romantic love relationships positively affected their general sense-making in the world, their ability to see humans as good people, and their ability to learn from others (3).

P1, a German 61-year-old female participant who is in a virtual long-term romantic relationship with an Indian man, described how the relationship influences her understanding of the world:

For me, the world is first of all good and beautiful per se, life is worth living, and people are first of all good. Much of the negativity is caused by our actions, by greed, avarice, jealousy, a lack of willingness to strive for the best, good, beautiful and sustainable for the good of all, by the fact that what is not me is perceived as different, alien and threatening. That there is too little joy in celebrating diversity and in appreciating it.

This statement points out that more positivity is needed and that it can be achieved through joy, celebration of diversity and appreciation of transculturality which can be gained for transcultural love relationships. The transcultural relationship can help to foster this positive and complex understanding of the world through diverse experiences and intimacy. The relationship can consequently help to overcome the negative actions which might manifest in specific contexts, such as jealousy, greed or lack to strive for the best. Transcultural relationships can bring joy into one's life and thereby contribute in general to appreciate diversity more.

#### **4.3.1.2 Increased or Revised Self-Understanding**

In five cases, the transcultural romantic love relationship was found to support self-reflection (5). In two cases it impacted strongly on the understanding of Christianity and the ability to live Christian values (2). The relationship helped one of the partners to revise their views on religion and themselves. A 28-year-old female Malay participant explained how her relationship with her Bengali husband brings her increased understanding of herself and supports her spiritual and religious values:

What makes my life become meaningful as I think whatever I get in my life is the best for me, I have a strong faith towards my destiny and the reason behind it. I always feel grateful for anything I get and I know, in my life I am totally not alone. I have family, my lovely husband and also my friends. No doubt, my romantic relationship does contribute to the



meaningfulness in my life. This is because, from this relationship I learn about to never give up in life, to appreciate others more, I know myself better and even I can improve myself as well.

This statement demonstrates increased self-understanding and new directions in this respondent's thinking which support her relationship with her husband who comes from a very different cultural background and lives with her in her country. Besides the cultural learning, this participant concluded for herself that she learned through the relationship with her husband to "never give up", to "fight together" for their dreams and overcome feelings of loneliness and the ability to stick together as a couple across cultural divides.

### ***4.3.2 Manageability and Transcultural Romantic Love Relationships***

Besides the increased comprehensibility, participants were of the opinion that their general manageability is positively influenced by their transcultural romantic love relationships and vice versa. Accordingly, findings show that manageability is either related to values and ideas which are addressed (27) or to actions (23).

#### **4.3.2.1 Manage the Relationship Through Values and Ideas**

Altogether, respondents made 27 statements relating to this category. Eight participants found that their care for the other person increases and helps them to manage their lives. Five participants expressed the belief that the active creation of similar values supports them in their transcultural romantic love relationships and vice versa. P1, a German 61-year-old female participant commented about her Indian partner:

What I find most beautiful between the two of us is that we have a great harmony in terms of our values or share many desires. But at the same time, the differences are big enough that it remains exciting and there are chances for learning opportunities and occasions for negotiation.

Creating similarities in each other's value set is very important in this virtual, long-distance relationship, but at the same time, difference is acknowledged and appreciated, since it also brings excitement and negotiation. This transcultural relationship holds both for the participant: the known and familiar and the unknown and unfamiliar. Their combination makes the relationship exciting and adventurous.

Four participants found that believing in relationship-building helped them to manage their relationships. Other participants mentioned the following: appreciating and respecting others impacted positively on relationship management (4), accepting twists and turns (2), openness (2) and sharing goals (1) wishing for same culture (1) were important aspects of managing relationships.

A Coloured, 28-year-old female South African participant (P11), talked about the difficulties she experienced with her South African SeSotho boyfriend.

Sometimes it makes me wish that I was of that certain culture or vice versa so that things like customs and language and communication could just be better.

This statement suggests that it is not always easy to be different and to come from different cultures, but rather that it can be very tiring when the first language is not shared and the values are anchored in different customs and traditions. The participant expresses a longing to be from the same background to make life within the relationship easier and the communication between the partners better.

#### 4.3.2.2 Manage the Relationship Through Action

In the category of managing the relationship through action, 23 statements were found. Participants highlighted talking (4), transforming the negative into the positive (4) and praying (4) as important actions which create manageability for them in the transcultural romantic love relationships. These communicative actions seem to be extremely important, although the topic to be discussed varies. P4, a German female in a relationship with a partner from the USA, described how the couple talks with each other to create new ways of being together:

We talk about our cultural and personal ways and try to create a third way which fits us both, I hope. Sometimes it works, sometimes it does not. But I believe a key to a long-term functioning relationship is creating something common and striving for that together.

P4 points out that communication is key to a long-term relationship. Long-lasting relationships are further built on developing and creating commonalities to manage the relationship across differences. That means that partners of different origins should spend time together and develop an idea of the partner's values, behaviours and perspectives. Based on the exchange of ideas, the transcultural relationship might hold new perspectives which can be brought together to develop a "third common culture".

For another three individuals, manageability was associated with listening to the other, and convincing their family about the transcultural romantic love relationships.

The impact of the family of origin on the relationship was found to be particularly significant. One woman and one man of Malay cultural background, and one Afghan woman, referred to their need to convince either their own family or that of their partner of the value of their transcultural romantic love relationships. P13, a Malay woman with a Bengali husband, wrote:

For me, what attracted me to my partner is because of his endless efforts and patience to win my heart, my family's heart, and to get their permission for a legal marriage... I feel this relationship is unsustainable and impossible when thinking about my family's acceptance towards foreigners. Nevertheless, my husband continued and remained, convincing me that nothing is impossible in this world, because it is God who determines everything, not us.

Importantly he said, we must not give up and must always fight together to maintain this relationship. What he said made me more enthusiastic and believe in him.

The critical concern of the family is an important obstacle to the relationship that needs to be overcome with strength and will. The determination of her male partner convinced the participant of his seriousness about their relationship. However, to convince the wife about keeping up the relationship, the partner included God in the relationship and put his hopes into God's hands. The partner ascribed God, the Almighty, as the power that could help the couple to make their common life possible beyond all odds.

Additionally, two participants pointed out that moving to live in a third (new) country can bring equality which helps to manage the relationship. Finally, staying with a partner in the partner's country, helping the partner and being monogamous, all these aspects help to create a functioning and loving relationship.

A 23-year-old Afghan female participant (P18) who lives in Iran on a "residence card" is doubtful about her underlying or even unconscious reasons for going out with her Iranian boyfriend. In the interview, she asks herself the repeating question if she really only loves her boyfriend or if she is together with him to finally marry and get the ability to gain a status in the country.

For P18, another Afghan woman living in Iran, the relationship with her Iranian boyfriend is also an opportunity for her to get a safe residence status in Iran or, even better, to move to a third country with her partner. Since the woman wishes for equal opportunities within the couple's relationship, she considers to move to a country in which both of the partners are foreign to equal out their advantages and to find peace in a third space where they are free to create something new together.

Though he has never questioned the sincerity of my love for him, there is a lingering doubt, which is sometimes expressed or reinforced by others and on occasions I feel inside me, that I might have chosen him to get my documents when we hopefully marry. I don't love him for that, not at least consciously, but sometimes self-doubt prevails and I ask myself that maybe subconsciously this issue has something to do with my attraction to him. To resolve that, we have talked about immigrating to a third country where both of us would be equals! That actually might work and it's an opportunity for both of us.

A move to a third country would make the romantic love relationship more equal and could help this participant and her boyfriend to address the structural inequality that she currently feels, and which is seen by others as a possible hidden reason for her relationship.

P10, a German 48-year-old engineer who has been married for 24 years to a South African Coloured woman, points out that his identity did not change much with his relationship "other than that she kept me in South Africa for a long time". Based on the relationship with a South African woman, P10 decided to stay in South Africa and not to return home.

Love relationships can make participants move, stay in a certain country for more time, or dream of a life in a third country.

### **4.3.3 *Meaningfulness and Transcultural Romantic Love Relationships***

The third and final component of sense of coherence in this discussion, the concept of meaningfulness, is the most important in the described transcultural romantic love relationships. Here, meaningfulness is connected to the five categories of interpersonal meaningfulness, intrapersonal meaningfulness, spirituality, positive feelings and others. Meaningfulness is the most frequently mentioned category of sense of coherence in this study.

#### **4.3.3.1 Interpersonal Meaningfulness**

Altogether 12 participants highlighted that the relationships give them meaning in life, which affects their relationships. For P22, a 29-year-old Arab living in Iran with a Farsi-speaking Iranian woman, the relationship brings him development and intercultural learning, new ideas of identity and meaning:

Myself using Farsi and her trying to learn Arabic as complementary devices of romantic and erotic exchanges have enriched the way I define myself.

His transcultural romantic love relationship helps him to define and discover himself through the use of a new language. He experiences it as an enrichment to learn a new language and help his girlfriend to learn his language.

Another four individuals stated that care creates meaningfulness in a transcultural romantic love relationship, while three more individuals experienced meaningfulness by getting to know each other. Finally, two participants found that meaningfulness was created by doing things together, sharing dreams and by giving and receiving compliments.

#### **4.3.3.2 Positive Feelings**

A total of seven individuals found that love makes their life meaningful. For example, a Japanese 38-year-old male academic (P7) who lives with his Dutch wife in the UK pointed out:

I think until I met her, I didn't know what love was. My family isn't really love-oriented, it's more a task-oriented family ... When I met her, she knew what unconditional love was. That's very meaningful.

This participant explained how much he enjoyed the unconditional love he learned from his wife. He believed that his wife was brought up in a cultural context that fosters the idea of unconditional love. The participant felt that the experience of unconditional love—which is very far from the relationship concept of task orientation in his own culture—became a very meaningful experience for him.

For five participants, enjoying life, happiness, longing and passion fill their lives with meaning in their transcultural romantic love relationships. Three participants experienced a positive effect in the transcultural romantic love relationship and feel that this is meaningful to them. Finally, the experience of tenderness creates meaning for one participant.

#### 4.3.3.3 Intrapersonal Meaningfulness

On an intrapersonal level, nine individuals stated that they can develop themselves further through the transcultural romantic love relationship which provides them with meaning. Six participants emphasised that being able to be “who you really are” creates meaning in the relationship. Many different participants referred to enjoying the way they could “be who they are” when being with their partner. For example, P1 said:

I can feel his longing, despite the thousands of kilometres, when he misses me or, as he says, that he doesn't have to hide or bend with me.

P1 highlights that she and her Indian boyfriend both feel that they can express their true selves without hiding anything or presenting themselves as what and who they are not. This might mean that their personal values and actions fit very well on a personal level, and they feel accepted and free with their partners.

P22, an Arab man in Iran, mentioned that his relationship “enriched the way I define myself,” while P21, a 25-year-old Iranian woman in a transcultural romantic love relationship for 3 years with an Afghan man, commented:

Being independent of my family, on my feet. My partner has enabled me to a large extent to be who I want to be in life.

For P21, the relationship with her boyfriend helps her to be who she wants to be, in the sense of becoming independent from her family of origin. The partner helped her to stand on her own feet and get into the process of individuation, maturing and self-development. This step is a very meaningful one for the participant, as well as for the partner. Based on this independence from the family of origin, they can create their own relationship.

Finally, two participants found that the experience of inner peace from building up and being in a transcultural romantic relationship, makes their lives meaningful. They just feel comfortable in their transcultural relationship and believe that they have found peace within the other which they consider as very meaningful.

#### 4.3.3.4 Spirituality

Altogether 11 participants referred to spirituality as an important aspect of their transcultural romantic relationship. For participants, spirituality means a connection to God and faith (4), gratitude (4) and creating a meaningful and purposeful life (3).

For example, a Japanese 52-year-old woman (P9)—who is married to a US-American husband—highlighted the importance of God and spirituality in the relationship:

[We are] spiritually connected and support each other. I also see our relationship is trustworthy and reliable.

P9 points out that in their intercultural relationship, their belief and spirituality form a huge part of the connection between them. For her, the values of spirituality, mutual support, trustworthiness and reliability are connected and support their relationship. Her statement shows that the connection of the couple goes beyond the individual connection and the cultural divides: it is of a higher power or at least supported by it.

#### 4.3.3.5 Others

Finally, participants spoke of other aspects of meaningfulness in the context of their transcultural romantic love relationships in more depth. These meaningful aspects of their transcultural relationships included other related areas of their life, such as career, change of residence, health (each mentioned twice), hobby, family and kids (each mentioned once). This suggests that meaningfulness is created through the relationship, which simultaneously enriches the meaning of other aspects of life.

## 4.4 Transcultural Identity Development

Identity plays an important role for participants with regard to their transcultural romantic love relationships. Identity very much defines who people feel they are. This is also the case in transcultural romantic love relationships. Within the contexts of their relationships, individuals explore themselves as well as the other person more in-depth.

The findings on identity development within the transcultural romantic love relationships are differentiated in terms of intrapersonal identity development (43), cultural identity development (34), interpersonal identity development (23), identity self-awareness (23), actions (6), feelings (5) and creating a sexual identity (4). Generally, identity development is extraordinarily important on an intrapersonal level, meaning that individuals use the relationship to develop themselves personally and expand their identities.

In the following, examples of quotations illustrating the different categories are presented (Table 4.5).

**Table 4.5** Identity development

Identity categories	Identity codes	Participants	Total
<b>Intrapersonal identity development 43</b>			
	Increasing self-development	6,7,8,11,15	5
	Becoming more myself/ consider who I am	3,5,6,11,18	5
	Become more tolerant	1,11,14,17	4
	Becoming more caring	5,9,13,15	4
	Becoming more patient	1,10,12, 17	4
	Becoming more self-determined	1,9,18	3
	Becoming calmer	1,5,7	3
	Becoming kind	4,13	2
	Becoming more generous	1,4	2
	Becoming more responsible	6,9	2
	Becoming more trusting	17	1
	Becoming more honest	17	1
	Becoming more open	15	1
	Becoming more cautious	2	1
	Becoming more appreciative	13	1
	Becoming more ambitious	12	1
	Becoming more authentic	20	1
	Becoming less critical	6	1
	Becoming more resilient	6	1
<b>Cultural identity development 32</b>			
<i>Intercultural competence 14</i>			
	Helps me to learn	1,3,4,5,11,13,14,20	8
	Adjust to culture	7,9,17	3
	Questioning cultural stereotypes	1,11	2
	Balance self and other identities	18	1
<i>Cultural practices 9</i>			
	Becoming bicultural	4,5,9,18	4
	Develop value set	4,13,18	3
	Meditating	6	1
	Mindfulness	6	1
<i>Cultural centre of life 5</i>			
	Living abroad	4,7,18	3
	Stay for a long time in her country	10	1
	Make his home my home	3	1
<i>Religious and spiritual identity 4</i>			
	Moves me away from God	3	1
	Becoming a Christian	9	1
	Develop Christian values	4,9	2

(continued)

**Table 4.5** (continued)

Identity categories	Identity codes	Participants	Total
<b>Interpersonal identity development 24</b>			
	General identity development	1,3,4,5,6,11,12,13,14,17,20	11
	More fulfilled life	8,9,11,12	4
	Working together through hardships	4,8,11	3
	Helps to develop my own goals	12	1
	Gives me guidance	9	1
	Be a good person	11	1
	Increase social connection	12	1
	Fight for common dreams	4	1
<b>Identity self-awareness 23</b>			
	Self-reflection	2,3,4,5,6,11,12,13,14,15,17,18,20,	13
	Finding self-truth	2,11,12,15,17,20	6
	Developing self-love	5,15,17	3
	Recognising own priorities	15	1
<b>Actions 6</b>			
	Having kids	4,7,11	3
	Protect myself	2	1
	Makes me withdraw	2	1
	Better sleep	6	1
<b>Feelings 6</b>			
	Feel freer	3,5	2
	Getting anxious	1,3	2
	Develop anger	2	1
<b>Sexual identity 5</b>			
	Evolving sexual identity	1,3,12,14	4
	Intimacy	12	1

#### ***4.4.1 Intrapersonal Identity Development***

Most frequently mentioned were intrapersonal identity development aspects which are important for the participants in their transcultural romantic relationships. Accordingly, increasing self-development was mentioned five times by different participants.

P17, a 29-year-old German who is in a relationship with a Moroccan male partner pointed out that her transcultural development is very much connected to her transcultural romantic relationship with her boyfriend:

I adopted a much more laid-back attitude to time and punctuality (which sometimes creates difficulties with other Germans). I'm more open to talk to—I easily get in touch with strangers.



The participant presents her changes in values and behaviour and the difficulties that people from her culture of origin experience with her because she deviates from the norm in her culture of origin. She is German and according to her view on German culture, punctuality is highly valued within the culture. However, based on her transcultural romantic love relationship, her values and norms changed and she is no longer punctual, creating conflict or at least irritation in her German environment. It can be assumed that her personal lifestyle fits well with the values and behaviour of being more relaxed, so that it is easy for her to adapt to her boyfriend's style and to strengthen her connection with him. It might further be assumed that the couple fits well together since they share common styles in terms of, for example dealing with time and its management.

Apart from this statement, five participants indicated becoming more themselves (consider who I am) as an important development. They feel that the relationship helps them to be who they are, as discussed above (under intrapersonal meaningfulness).

Further, participants ascribe different attributes to what they are becoming through the relationships, such as more tolerant (4), more caring (4), more patient (4), more self-determined (3), calmer (3), kinder (2), more generous (2) and more responsible (2). Finally, several aspects were mentioned by one participant each, specifically being more trusting, honest, open, cautious, appreciative, ambitious, authentic, critical and resilient. In summary, according to the participants, they develop identity aspects they like and value about themselves; this is easy to do because they feel love and are loved.

## **4.5 Cultural Identity Development**

For the participants, cultural identity aspects include the concepts of transcultural identity development, cultural practices, cultural centre of life and religious and spiritual identity.

### ***4.5.1 Intercultural Competence***

Intercultural competences were mentioned as part of the identity development of 14 participants. Eight described how the transcultural romantic love relationship helps them to learn; three confirmed that they had adjusted to the culture, two questioned cultural stereotypes more than before, and one mentioned balancing the self and other identity parts.

P14, for example highlighted the differences in cultural and language deficits, noting that it takes time to learn:

The differences have mostly to do with social and cultural backgrounds. He can't deeply relate to our new year holiday, nor can I relate to Christmas, for example. There is a bit of political differences as well. ... But we learn.

Cultural gaps need to be bridged in transcultural relationships, because the individuals, like in this example, might not be able to relate to the festivals the partners may celebrate. To celebrate, the cultural highlights of the year need to be learned by the partners and could become a field of learning.

P1, a German woman in a romantic love relationship with an Indian 30 years her junior, commented:

Misunderstood power is also certainly a problem in that power is not understood in the Hanna Arendtian sense, that is, as something that corresponds to the human capacity not only to act or to do something, but to join forces with others and to act in agreement with them. This then leads to an above and below, powerful and powerless, exploiting or being exploited etc. In connection with this, of course, there are also manifold assumptions, stereotypes and attributions, also concerning love relationships.

P1 also uses her transcultural romantic relationship to become aware of the stereotypes that are constructed in the general public and reflected in the private sphere of her own relationship. In this way, the relationship helps to detect stereotypes and power struggles within the self which might be anchored in the political system and society, and at the same time are reflected (even unconsciously) in the transcultural romantic relationship. She emphasises that power might be a challenging topic in transcultural love relationships since there might be a powerless and a powerful partner in such a relationship. The relationship might be built on certain cultural assumptions, stereotypes and attributions which are sometimes underlined by power issues. It is important that both partners are aware of these challenges and that they are able to reflect upon them and work through them. Only then can issues of power be reframed in the relationship context.

#### 4.5.1.1 Cultural Practices

Four statements referred to the fact that participants develop a bicultural identity based on being in a transcultural relationship with their partners. A young Russian woman (P5) pointed out how she loves to develop herself and her cultural and language abilities:

I love my country and my native culture, the Russian language, this is what I grew up from, where are my roots. At the same time, my whole life I love to learn other languages and get to know other cultures.

The interest in culture and language and living abroad fosters the bicultural mindset and lifestyle and fits well with the idea of living a transcultural romantic relationship. She knows exactly where her roots are and on what she can build on.

P4, a German woman and academic, points out with regard to her US partner:

Often, I feel that he and I fit very well—as individual persons, not necessarily as cultural beings. We grew up on different continents, but he grew up bicultural and I live a transcul-

tural life, living in a different country than my home country, bringing up my kids in different cultural and subcultural contexts. So, we both are very aware of culture and our cultural differences and we are always on the lookout for our personal and cultural similarities.

Biculturalism is about living in two cultures simultaneously, and being able to switch between cultures and mindsets. Bringing two bicultural people together in a transcultural romantic love relationship is exciting as well as a challenge, and requires the act of finding similarities to secure a valued space. For this participant, it is highly important that partners aim at becoming aware of each other's culture and the differences and similarities. The aim is to create similarities to bridge the differences and gaps within the relationship and to create a common awareness, consciousness and understanding.

Meditating and mindfulness are also specific cultural practices that participants use in their transcultural romantic relationship, to contribute to the identity development of both partners.

Five more statements from participants referred to values in the context of identity. Three individuals said that they developed a new value set in the context of their relationship and two statements referred specifically to developing Christian values.

P11, a 28-year-old Coloured Christian South African woman who lives with her Black South African boyfriend, pointed out that Christian values matter to her, while cultures are less important:

Being a person who does not prefer a specific cultural group to interact with and entertain in all areas of my life. To me, if you're a good person then that is all that should matter. However, when it comes to the religion aspect, I am very picky and prefer to remain on the Christian path (preferably Catholic).

This participant highlighted that her Christian values are very important to her and she aimed at sharing these values with her boyfriend. However, the cultural aspects of her identity seem to be less important than the religious values. She claimed further that she is able to adapt with regard to cultural issues easily, but that she cannot adapt with regard to her Christian belief. Her religious beliefs seem to be a core part of her personal identity.

#### **4.5.1.2 Centre of Life**

The findings show that five statements were made referring to a change in identity development based on a shift to the centre of the lives of the partners founded in their common relationship. Three individuals explained that they lived abroad owing to their romantic relationships; one stated that he remained for a long time in the country of origin of his partner just to be with her, and another participant pointed out that a female participant made the partner's "home my home" (P18). The creation of a common space and place plays a major role in transcultural romantic love relationships.

### 4.5.1.3 Religious and Spiritual Identity

Finally, two statements indicate that participants experienced a change in their religious identity. One described the participant's movement away from God. This statement needs to be understood in the context of the challenges the participant experienced in her relationship. She describes that she has always been driven by her strong Christian values and her religion. However, experiencing problems and challenges in her relationship with a man from a different culture and religion made her question her own belief. At a point in time, she highlights, she was even drawn to another religion—the religion of her partner—or even went through states of confusion and the experience of losing her own religious identity.

The other statement on religion in the dataset confirmed a change in religious affiliation. The participant highlights that she had converted to Christianity and that this conversion brought her closer to her partner, because of sharing a similar belief system and building their common transcultural and transreligious couple's identity.

It may be assumed that the connection through religious values and the sharing of religious values are core aspects of creating a common couple's identity. Differences in religious values and beliefs are experienced either experienced as a threat to the couple's identity or relationship or as differences that need to be bridged in the transcultural romantic love relationship. If there are major differences in religious belief and religious belonging that form part of the identity of the partner within a romantic relationship, this can lead to major challenges. If a partner converts to the religion of the other partner, this move is experienced as unifying. Religious belief does not play any role in the creation of the couple's identity if individuals respect the religion of the other while living their own religious identity. In this religion is an intersectional force that exists, but does not claim relevance to create a couple's shared identity. In this case, the couple usually draws on other intersectional identity aspects and values that partners naturally share, based on similar personal values which are usually anchored in their upbringing.

## 4.6 Interpersonal Identity Development

Another 24 statements in the dataset referred to the interpersonal development that happens through the transcultural romantic relationship. Findings show that a general sense of coherence was mentioned in 11 statements and that partners believe that their comprehensibility, manageability or meaningfulness are connected to their relationship with their partner.

Comments from four participants pointed out that they experienced a more fulfilled life since the relationship began, while three people noted that the transcultural romantic relationship helped them to work through difficulties in their lives. For example, P4 highlighted:

I experience it as having overcome solitude and loneliness. I feel connected and loved and accepted and seen and as if I can live with him for the rest of my life.

Here, the hardships that are overcome are loneliness and solitude and thereby a lack of friendship, companionship and togetherness. The participant feels more fulfilled and connected and her statement shows that the relationship offers her fulfilment and hope, as well as an idea of her future. Besides this, the participant feels accepted, valued and recognised in a holistic way and her partner gives her the confidence to live and conduct herself authentically.

Each of the following aspects of interpersonal identity development was mentioned once: offering help to develop own goals, giving guidance, being a good person, increasing social connection and fighting for dreams in common. This shows that interpersonal identity aspects which are constructed in transcultural romantic love relationships are strongly connected to supporting each other by developing goals, aims and dreams together. If individuals do not share many cultural or religious values, but manage to build their common future on commonly defined aims and dreams, then couples manage to build their common identity. Additionally, it is important for the couple's identity creation that they build social connections which they can share and that they can feel at home with. Finally, partners feel good about the transcultural romantic relationship when they can either give or receive guidance to develop further in their lives.

#### **4.6.1 Identity Self-Awareness**

Additionally, 23 statements pointed to an increased self-awareness anchored in the experiences within the transcultural romantic love relationship. Thirteen individuals believe that they self-reflect more deeply, thinking about themselves and how they see the world as a result of their relationship. Many of the statements include comments regarding self-reflection. Self-reflection usually occurs when individuals realise that there are differences in perception, observation and interpretation between themselves and their partner. Based on these perceived discrepancies, the partners initiate to reflect upon their own, personal views and find explanations for themselves to understand how exactly they see the world and why they perceive the world as they do. From that point of view, they then move forward to not only critically reflect upon themselves, but also upon their cultural contexts, families and societies they live in. They become more conscious and aware about themselves and their environment. The transcultural romantic love relationships initiate and stimulate deeper reflection and based on that an adjustment of personal values and actions.

P13, who is 28 years old and of Malay origin, married to a Bengali man, explained how her self-reflective and self-aware attitude helped her to create an improved understanding of herself the couple's relationship and the impact of the couple's cultural contexts:

The most important developments I made in terms of my identity development is ... I am able to develop a sense and understanding within the context of cultural demands and social norms..... Through my transcultural romantic love relationship, it does impact my identity development as I become more open-minded, appreciate other differences, and be able to socialise with my husband from different culture and norms.

The transcultural romantic love relationship with her husband from another culture impacted positively on the reflectiveness of the participant. It increased her understanding of her own culture and that of her husband, as well as her own standing and viewpoint within the cultural demands and social norms which include various diversity aspects, such as gender and age. The statement shows how her self-awareness led her to value their relationship. In her statement, she indirectly expresses that diversity within their relationship can be experienced as exhaustive and that one always has to stay aware and conscious of oneself and the partner within context. However, she reframed her diversity experiences and challenges as personal development goals, namely becoming more open-minded, appreciative and driven to create a common couple identity. This statement is an example of how partners within a relationship can manage to create growth by reframing their personally perceived challenges. It additionally shows the vision of this married woman to grow, as well as her determination to make the partnership work and her individual resilience. By reframing cultural differences and challenges the participant worked on her attitude, her open-mindedness, her ambiguity tolerance and thereby on her intercultural competence.

Six individuals felt that they were finding self-truth within their transcultural romantic love relationship. That means that they understood themselves better than before the relationship and also discovered their “true” and authentic identity parts which were most important to them. Additionally, three participants developed more self-love, and one was recognising her own priorities more clearly based on the relationship. When participants feel loved by their partners, they can love themselves more, because they experience their self-worth and value.

### **4.6.2 Actions**

In summary, six participants highlighted in their statements how they developed their identity in terms of actions connected to the relationship. Three individuals developed through having children together and having to care for them together, thereby shifting their focus from themselves towards something important that resulted from the relationship.

One person each commented during the interviews that the relationship helped them to protect themselves, made them withdraw, and helped them to sleep better. Since they experienced the care of their partners for themselves and their life, one participant felt he has to care for himself as well. Another participant highlighted that she withdrew from her family and friends and also from her own culture during her relationship. This indicates a strong identity shift. Finally, one participant

mentioned his increased sleep and sleeping patterns while being in his relationship. That might lead to the interpretation that he felt safe, cared for and at peace in his relationship.

P2, a 68-year-old US male participant wrote:

I think the opportunities were ... to try to learn more about ... other people and maybe a little bit more about myself ... and the opportunity to have children, since I was able to have children when I got married ... in my middle forties. ... I think the only sameness was that we both loved our children.

Having children made a real impact on P2's relationship with his Argentinian wife. In this case, he explains that the children were the foundation of the transcultural romantic relationship. They were what bound the couple together for over two decades according to his perception. He emphasised that he only felt connected to his wife based on the fact that he had children with her. However, this situation bound the marriage and relationship together for a very long time, giving it an aim to bring up the children together.

### 4.6.3 *Feelings*

Five statements in the study named specific feelings and emotions that individuals experienced in the relationship which have or had an impact on their identity. Two participants stated the feeling of freedom through being engaged in the relationship. The relationship gave them the freedom to withdraw from their cultural contexts, their societies or families and start their own lives. They further felt freer in terms of living up to certain cultural values, norms and standards. Being in a transcultural romantic love relationship opens doors to new worlds, values and ways to live one's life. It thereby gives freedom and frees a person from the experience of living only up to the value set of one's own socio-cultural context. The newly experienced culture of the partner presents a new option to live one's life in new ways. It also provides ideas on how to live up to different or new cultural values.

Feeling anxious was also highlighted twice in the data. The transcultural romantic love relationship makes participants anxious when they develop insecurities on how the relationship can move forward and when questions cannot be answered with regard to a common future. Anxiety increases when partners feel that they cannot bridge the cultural differences or that they cannot bridge the distance between them. They might also feel anxious when they are unable to create a shared vision and future.

The Romanian participant, on the one hand, felt free in her new relationship, and anxious on the other hand. She experienced a strong ambiguity within the relationship due to the fact that she felt that her strict values and norms became looser. However, experiencing the freedom to act differently from her culture of upbringing, she also experienced anxiety. The anxiety also connected to her reduced and limited understanding of the patterns of thinking, feeling, acting and

behaving of her partner. She highlighted that she was insecure about interpreting his actions since she did not know how to interpret his behaviour and what it meant.

Two individuals, a 46-year-old Romanian woman who has an Ethiopian boyfriend, and a 24-year-old Russian woman both “feel freer” in their transcultural romantic love relationships, while a German man and a Romanian woman (P1, P3) both feel more anxious, in particular about losing their partners. A US man (P2) spoke of a great “deal of anger” which his wife brought into the relationship from her family of origin. This led him to develop anger during the relationship since he felt the constant tension and anger in the relationship. The participant blamed his wife and her anger and described further how it impacted on his own feelings and how it impacted negatively on the relationship.

#### **4.6.4 Sexual Identity**

Five statements referred to sexual identity development. Three statements highlighted that participants experienced an evolving sexual identity based on their transcultural romantic love interactions. Through the new experiences of romantic love and intimacy, participants highlight that they developed new ideas and thoughts about their own sexual identity and its development.

P12, a 31-year-old male engineer who is Bengali-speaking from Bangladesh commented on his sexual identity. He lives with his wife in Malaysia who is a Malaysian. He emphasised the importance of sexual identity in their transcultural romantic love relationship and the sexual experiences and their impact on his identity.

Like other relationships in our lives, transcultural romantic love relationships play an important role in fulfilling our needs for intimacy, social connection, and sexual relations. It helps my identity development.

Here, in particular, intimacy, social connection and the sexual relationship play important roles in the identity development of his husband.

The same was true for a 26-year-old Iranian man (P14) who is gay and lives in a long-distance relationship with his partner from the USA. For P14, the same-sex relationship was full of “good sex”, “passionate sex”, new experiences and self-development with regard to his sexual identity. He stated:

His sex preferences were also kinkier than mine, but I managed to get around, and now I like it the way it is, which is more his original style.... There is a liberating equality in a gay relationship, especially in sex, which I think straight couples can never experience. We are absolutely equals, to the last detail, in our emotional and physical relationship. That’s the sameness. I both literally and metaphorically do to him whatever he does to me; which are all good things.

According to this gay man, the relationship with his partner is only based to a certain degree on differences, such as the different cultural and nationalities



differences, as well as the different sexual preferences. However, he feels equal with his partner due to their experienced homosexuality and their similar experiences with regard to their emotional and physical sameness as men. The participant describes that the equality lies in the possibility of two men doing the same to each other in terms of sexual practices. However, the participant adjusted towards his partner's sexual preferences to be equal to him. Equality is thereby mainly based on physical, emotional and sexual preferences.

## 4.7 Interlinking the Findings

The findings from this study show clear interconnections between transcultural romantic love relationship, sense of coherence and identity development. The statements of the participants reveal how their transcultural romantic relationships are deeply connected to relationship qualities and positive values. Additionally, feelings and actions to construct a relationship based on spiritual aspects as well as holistic body–mind–soul connections are highlighted. Future-orientated attitude is based on common dreams and the idea of spending a lifetime together. The sense of coherence and identity development blend in with these love-related qualities which are emphasised by the participants.

Transcultural romantic relationships are strongly connected to meaningfulness in the lives of the participants. They create meaningfulness for their own lives through caring, through increased positive feelings, and the development potential of the transcultural romantic love relationship. The partner as well as the relationship as such makes their life meaningful. Meaningfulness is thereby influenced through spirituality and spiritual values. Meaningfulness further on increases as well as through finding an optimal place of living, career, health, hobbies and family. Additionally, meaningfulness is influenced by the concepts the participants have based on their cultural concepts and upbringing. The participants highlight that their discourses around values and how to lead a meaningful common life are important to creating a shared life that is important to the partners.

Further, the transcultural romantic love relationship influences the sense of manageability. Manageability is experienced by the partners when they feel that the partner encourages them to use all of their resources and when they are of the opinion that the partner increases the resources and options in terms of accessibility and other resources.

Individuals manage the relationship increasingly through mindfulness-based values, ideas, and actions. Transcultural romantic relationships create more awareness of individual and relationship-based values, ideas and actions that influence the relationship positively. Further on, the relationship influences the partners and their ideas and values and this, again, increases the experience of manageability.

Through the transcultural romantic relationship, participants gain an increased and more in-depth and complex understanding of the world. They also experience an improved self-understanding (comprehensibility), since the experience with a

partner from another culture induces increased self-reflection and in particular a reflection of the differences and similarities in terms of values, religion, behaviour and worldview.

In summary, transcultural romantic relationships and a sense of coherence are strongly intertwined. The transcultural romantic love relationship might influence the development of the sense of coherence positively in the long term. It might also increase the sense of meaningfulness when the transcultural romantic love relationship is experienced as an enrichment and a relationship that provides the partners with life energy, positive feelings, new ideas and a vision for their common future. At the same time, it may be assumed that individuals with a strong sense of coherence might create transcultural romantic love relationships which are primarily based on the creation of interpersonal meaningfulness—with a strong focus on the well-being of and the care for that partner. However, this hypothesis needs to be explored in more depth in a follow-up study.

Finally, the connection between transcultural romantic love relationship and identity development seems to have its focus on the intrapersonal identity development aspects. Participants feel that through the transcultural romantic love relationship they can develop intrapersonally. By being able to express themselves as “who they are”, they usually experience personal growth and well-being. It might be assumed that the transcultural romantic love relationship supports both partners to express themselves in the way they feel most comfortable. The transcultural romantic relationship, therefore, supports self-development very strongly since participants feel that they can develop in the direction they see as their personal preference. Besides that, participants define themselves and their own ideals based on their interpersonal values and personality traits. It might be assumed that individuals who find themselves in a transcultural romantic relationship might experience their partners and the culture of their partners as more fitting to their own identity and their personal preferences than people from their own culture. Therefore, they feel free to behave according to their personal preferences and feel comfortable in doing so.

Participants develop their cultural identity through the transcultural romantic love relationship. This cultural identity includes the development of intercultural competence which involves cultural practices, the decisions regarding the cultural centre of life (place of residence) and the religious and spiritual identity. All of these aspects of the cultural identity are developed through being in a very close, intimate transcultural romantic love relationship. The cultural sense of coherence is one extraordinary aspect that participants feel they can only develop in this intense way in a transcultural romantic love relationship. It seems as if the transcultural aspect of the transcultural romantic love relationship includes a powerful development potential for the participants. This potential is based on the deep thoughts and their strong reflection of their experiences of cultural and language differences. They believe that the transcultural aspects help them to define themselves more consciously and actively. In particular, the participants question cultural stereotypes and develop more openness, cultural knowledge, values and awareness regarding religion, cultural practices, and the competences they need in order to manage the transcultural romantic love relationship.

Besides the intrapersonal development potential, participants develop themselves interpersonally, whereby these development potentials are strongly connected to creating meaningfulness through the social relationship and connection. Additionally, participants see that they develop an increased self-awareness—especially through increased self-reflection—within the transcultural romantic love relationship. Further, the transcultural romantic love relationship affects their actions, their feelings and their sexual behaviour. Their sense of coherence, and its sub-categories also need to be managed in transcultural romantic love relationship.

In terms of the interconnection of identity development and sense of coherence, the findings show that participants develop increased meaningfulness, manageability and comprehensibility. Meaningfulness is created not only through transcultural romantic relationships, but also through the general sense of coherence potential which transcultural romantic love relationships have. That means that participants feel that through their transcultural romantic relationship they can increase across all three sub-components of the sense of coherence.

Further, there seems to be a connection between the change in centre of life, and the idea that the transcultural romantic love relationship helps participants to manage their lives well together with the support of their partners. This connection with intimate partners and their support from them increases the experience of manageability. The activation of resources to manage conflicts seems to be connected to cultural identity development because individuals feel that they increase intercultural competence, cultural practices, religious and spiritual identity aspects while getting to know the partner in more depth. All the culture-related identity aspects seem to impact positively on sense of coherence, as long as participants feel that they understand and manage them well and consciously. And again, it might be assumed that a high sense of coherence in participants could help individuals to manage the challenges which come with transcultural experiences. However, this proposition needs to be explored further in follow-up studies. Generally, it seems as if sense of coherence and identity development can be influenced positively through transcultural romantic love relationships in terms of expanded meaningfulness, increased manageability and comprehensibility, accordingly laying the foundation for developing transcultural identity concepts. Thereby, the motivational component, the meaningfulness, seems to be extremely important to influence partners in their personal and common development.

# Chapter 5

## Discussion



**Abstract** Chapter 5 discusses the findings based on the presented theories. It highlights the contributions of this study to the existing theories, as discussed in Chap. 2.

Referring to the aim of the study and the posed research questions, the findings are interpreted and evaluated with regard to the state of the literature and knowledge. This study contributes to filling the void of research on transcultural romantic love relationships in the context of the theories on sense of coherence and identity development.

### 5.1 Transcultural Romantic Love Relationships

This study supports the definition of love as a fluid concept that is impacted by culture and that changes over time (Mayer & Vanderheiden, 2021a, 2021b). Love and love relationships may change over time and across the individual's lifespan.

Romantic love, specifically, is connected to relationship qualities (mainly care, sexual attraction, closeness, unity, support, intimacy, acceptance), certain feelings (love, happiness, trust, respect, unique feelings), actions (fighting for the relationship, listening, confronting, negotiation), spirituality in terms of spiritual connection, and future orientation (mutual development). It might be assumed that because of the transcultural aspect of the romantic love relationship in particular, individuals deal with other topics than couples who come from the same culture or ethnic group. It might be assumed that individuals who pursue transcultural romantic love relationships need to demonstrate particular care for their partners in dealing with differences and diversities. Further, partners need to create meaning within their romantic love relationship which goes beyond their own culture (Mayer, 2021). That means that partners in transcultural romantic love relationships have to overcome the cultural gaps within their relationships. They find themselves in a constant cultural hybrid situation in which cultural gaps need to be dealt with (Bell, 1980). Further, partners also need to transcend cultural boundaries (Bennett, 2017; Welsch,

1999). They have to be aware of the cultural boundaries, and deal with them with tolerance, acceptance and an attitude informed by kindness, calmness, longing, personal growth, understanding, openness and peacefulness. The study shows that a positive, humanistic attitude is important to deal with the partners and their cultural backgrounds.

The study further demonstrates the importance of feelings that create closeness. The participants highlight that closeness is created through trust and respect. Partners might not fully know or understand the cultural implications which impact their relationship.

However, participants emphasise that partners experience excitement based on their diverse cultural backgrounds and their experiences of diverse values, behaviours, perceptions, cognitions and interpretations of situations. On an intrapsychological level, participants show that they enjoy the experiences of differences in cultural upbringing and expression. However, on an interpersonal or social level, the findings show that participants often need to vigorously defend the relationship, because it transcends their cultural group's values and norms. This transcendence might be experienced as an offence or even a threat to the cultural system of the partners. Based on the descriptions of the participants, the partner, who is of a different cultural group or ethnic origin, is not easily accepted within the family of the partner and the couple might need to make an effort to convince the family of the partner of the relationship or bridge at least cultural and language barriers.

The participants of the study highlight that they need to have effective communication skills to understand their partners and their contexts as much as possible. These communication skills include the ability to listen, to confront, to discuss, to negotiate, to compromise, to set boundaries and to apologise. They further aim at establishing acceptance of their relationship within each partner's context by applying transcultural communication skills.

It is assumed that spirituality plays a major role in transcultural romantic love relationships across cultures. This is the case mainly for women who participated in this study. They highlight that spiritual aspects play a huge role when it comes to transcending cultural differences and issues.

While cultural differences might attract and separate partners, a strong spiritual (body, spirit, soul) connection appears to create meaning and sameness for the partners. Thereby, the creating of meaning and sameness stabilises the relationship. Finally, the study shows that partners need to project a common future together that shares their dreams and carries the relationship forward. An open communication about negotiating the future and creating an idea of a common future is crucial for the relationship. It also supports both partners to grow towards and grow together in a common, shared direction. All of these aspects mentioned within the study support Fromm's (1956) contention that love is an act of creating well-being for the other. It further speaks to Fromm's idea of two individuals growing together towards becoming "one" and partly participants emphasise that it is important to them to become "one" with their partner, sharing values, ideas and dreams. Thereby, feelings and emotions play a crucial role, since partners aim at sharing their emotions and living in particular positive emotions. The study also supports Mayer and

Vanderheiden's (2021a, 2021b) assertion that creating positive emotions in transcultural romantic love relationships is critically important for the health and well-being of partners within the relationship.

The transcultural romantic love relationships represented in the findings demonstrate how relationships change over time from infatuation (1), through disillusionment (2) towards mature love (3), as presented by Stritof (2020). Findings show the excitement and fascination to be with the partner in young couples in the infatuation phase. They also present critical aspects that participants experience during the disillusionment phase and the negative emotions which are associated with it, such as frustration, depression, anger or anxiety. Finally, several examples in this dataset show how participants turned their relationship from the disillusionment phase into a relationship that is based on mature love. All three phases mentioned by Stritof (2020) are reflected in the dataset.

However, the findings also show that couples do not necessarily manage to transform their transcultural romantic love relationship into a mature love scenario, but stay and remain in the disillusionment stage (e.g. P2 and P10). It might be that couples find themselves in the disillusionment stage and break up. However, the dataset only shows two examples of participants who find themselves within their relationships and at the same time within their disillusionment stage. The participants referring to disillusionment aspects within their relationship highlight that they are frustrated and disillusioned with regard to their love and their partner, but decided to stay in the relationship despite of feeling depressed, angry and disillusioned. One participant stayed in the relationship because of the children the couple has. The second participant held onto the relationship as long as he could and tried to make the relationship work and readjust the relationship. However, in the end, the relationship did not work out and the couple did not manage to transform the relationship from the disillusionment phase towards the mature love phase.

The findings expand the triangle of love of Sternberg (1997) which presents intimacy, passion and commitment as pillars of a romantic love relationship. In the findings, these three pillars are present, however, there are other concepts mentioned in the dataset which play a more important role for the participants. These concepts are as follows: firstly, care is the most frequently mentioned aspect with regard to its importance in transcultural romantic love relationships. Therefore, care and a caring attitude are highly important for individuals. Care is followed in frequency and importance by other concepts which bridge cultural differences, such as acceptance, growth, openness, understanding, peacefulness and forgiveness. The concepts mentioned show that acceptance plays an important part when it comes to the experiences of cultural or personal differences and often connects to the concept of openness. Further, many of the participants mention their wish regarding personal growth, referring to learning and developing their identity. Additionally, they mention understanding as an important concept of understanding differences and similarities. Understanding helps them to contextualise their knowledge of their partner and/or to gain deeper information and knowledge about complexities. Finally, two concepts play a role in transcultural romantic love relationships, namely, peacefulness and forgiveness. Since the participants feel that the conflict

potential in transcultural relationships may be higher than in intracultural relationships, they—at the same time—believe that the potential gain in terms of personal growth and gain of understanding and experience may be higher in transcultural romantic love relationships. Based on these ambiguities which these kind of relationships bring along, participants highlight the importance of peacefulness and forgiveness in relationships.

## 5.2 Sense of Coherence in Transcultural Romantic Love Relationships

Regarding the sense of coherence (Antonovsky, 1979, 1987), the findings show that transcultural romantic love relationships can be a resource for the individual's mental health and well-being by fostering meaningfulness, manageability and comprehensibility (Bhattacharya et al., 2020; Benz et al., 2014). Through experiencing the culture of the partner and gaining knowledge on it, participants might feel that they gain a deeper understanding which contributes to their cultural and personal comprehensibility of the self and the partner. Further, they aim at managing the challenges by activating their resources to deal with challenges constructively. Finally, they see the relationship as being meaningful towards their life, their life's purpose and call. They feel that their partner contributes to their meaning in life and they imagine a future with them which will fulfil their dreams and meaning in life more.

Findings show that creating meaningfulness is extremely important for participants in transcultural romantic love relationships; they use their relationships to create this (new) meaningfulness in their lives based on transcultural experiences. Meaningfulness is thereby created mainly through the interpersonal common, relationship-based experiences, but also through the positive feelings, the self-development, the experience of spiritual values such as faith, gratefulness and purpose and a spillover effect of the transcultural romantic love relationship into other areas of life (such as career, place of residence, and health). Through the transcultural romantic love relationship, individuals, in particular, develop an increased ability to manage their lives and the relationship well through action (communication, spiritual support and the motivation to create a common residence) and values and ideas (the values of care, creating common similarity, goals and a third culture through "thick and thin"). Finally, individuals experience an increased comprehensibility of their world based on their new learning from and with their partner, and through their stimulated self-reflection.

Acknowledging the three salutogenic sub-categories of the sense of coherence contributes to the participants' experiences of increased mental health and well-being.

Transcultural romantic love relationships support the idea and contribute to an increased and intensified (re-)negotiation of the understanding of internal (the self) and external (the world) experiences as described by Lindmark et al. (2020). In the

transcultural romantic love relationship, which is partly experienced as stressful (e.g. when residence has to be renegotiated or family needs to be convinced of the relationship), couples are able to activate their resources (as described in Antonovsky, 1987). This suggests that a transcultural romantic love relationship requires resourcefulness. However, the most important component of the relationship is meaningfulness (Mayer, 2011), since it is the foundation for creating a common life, similar ideas and values, common growth, health and solutions (Braun-Lewensohn & Mayer, 2020; Lindström & Eriksson, 2006) when the transcultural aspects of romantic love relationships become stressors.

### **5.3 Identity Development in Transcultural Romantic Love Relationships**

Identity development is a core aspect of transcultural romantic love relationships on four identity development levels: intrapersonal, cultural, interpersonal and sexual. The relationship is further connected to identity awareness, actions and feelings which form part of the identity. Findings support the idea that identity is a complex process (Erikson, 1950) and participants mention that their identity is built on place, perceptions, memories, thoughts, values and environment (see Hauge, 2007). Identity development is based on values and on cultural, intercultural, and intra-cultural preferences (see also Frankfurt, 1999; Kühler, 2021), as well as identity awareness, feelings, actions and sexuality.

Findings support the assumption that identities are social constructs in dynamic processes (Schwarz & Williams, 2020) and it is shown that they are influenced by transcultural romantic love relationships. While participants build their own cultural identities anchored in their culture of upbringing (as also highlighted in Schwarz & Williams, 2020), intra-cultural, cultural and interpersonal identity aspects change within transcultural romantic love relationships. This means that the partner with a different cultural background affects the identity formation and development on different levels, also with regard to cultural identity aspects (Torres et al., 2009).

The assumption that cultural identity goes beyond national belonging and ethnicity (Wan & Chew, 2013) is supported in the findings by emphasising that it is built on intercultural competence, cultural practices, discourses about the cultural centre of life and religious and spiritual identity aspects. Finally, findings show that transcultural romantic love relationships influence the creation of transcultural identity aspects by going beyond their own cultural group membership and by building a new identity which includes transcultural discourses on intersectional aspects, as highlighted in the literature (Mayer & Mayer, 2021a, 2021b; Takhar et al., 2021), as well as in the findings. Here, participants emphasise the importance of developing positive intrapersonal identity aspects, in addition to interpersonal and cultural competences and practices, and spiritual foci. Transcultural romantic love relationships foster identity development based on self-reflection, self-truth and self-love. Further,



identity is usually constructed based on living personal priorities and fostering them. Finally, transcultural romantic love relationships are viewed as opening up possibilities for transcultural developments of the partners or even the couple to grow into a fusional identity. This fusional identity is seen as an identity that both partners in the couple relationship share and construct together.

#### **5.4 The Interlinkages of Transcultural Romantic Love Relationships, Sense of Coherence and Identity Development**

Interlinking the themes of the study, the findings show that transcultural romantic love relationships strongly support the development of sense of coherence through their relationship-orientated qualities such as care, support, unity, closeness and intimacy. This study supports the conclusions of Moksnes (2021) and Mayer and Oosthuizen (2020) that the sense of coherence is strengthened by love and vice versa.

In addition, positive feelings, actions and transcultural interactions—primarily aiming at communication that develops the transcultural romantic love relationship as well as spirituality and future orientation—are strongly connected to sense of coherence. Meaningfulness is created through the relationship, the strong feelings for one another, actions, spiritual connections and future orientations. Manageability is primarily created through relationship qualities, actions and spirituality. Last, but not least, comprehensibility is encouraged through relationship qualities and fostered by positive feelings while communicative actions help in understanding the situation and the others in new perspectives. Consequently, this study expands previous findings of Mayer (2011) and Mayer and Oosthuizen (2020). Personal growth happens for the participants in transcultural romantic love relationships; however, this study does not explore the impact of relationships after break-ups (see Gillen, 2011).

Further, it could be assumed that a person with a high sense of coherence may be better equipped to master the complexities of transcultural romantic love relationships and the identity development that happens within these love relationships (Frankfurt, 2004, 2006; Kühler, 2021) than individuals with a low sense of coherence.

Findings support previous research that deep meaningfulness is connected to spirituality (e.g. Mayer, 2011) which forms part of transcultural romantic love relationships. The study expands previous studies, by showing that participants in transcultural romantic love relationships need to be prepared and equipped to manage communicative actions across cultures and deal with the potential ambiguities and complexities (Antonovsky, 1979, 1987; Mittelmark et al., 2022).

The positive feelings experienced in transcultural romantic love relationships might strengthen the sense of coherence and be strengthened by the sense of coherence, while meaningfulness and spirituality seem to support each other (as in

Antonovsky, 1979, 1987) and the transcending of cultural differences and stressors (Mayer, 2011) in the transcultural romantic love relationship. Firstly, manageability is strongly connected to actions, values and ideas which relate to positive transformation, creating a commonplace, positive communication and calling for divine support. Secondly, manageability is connected to values and ideas mainly involving caring for each other while building a third culture based on common goals and respect. Positive transcultural romantic love relationships are assumed to foster the sense of coherence on all levels by increasing comprehensibility through the different cultural perspectives and increased self-reflectiveness, manageability through the transcultural discourses regarding actions and values, and increased relationship-anchored meaningfulness.

By developing the sense of coherence through transcultural romantic love relationships, identity development is encouraged, as described in previous studies (see Luyckx et al., 2008; Mayer, 2011). The current study further shows that individuals with a high sense of coherence can describe and present themselves in a complex manner (thereby supporting Mayer, 2011) and are prepared to manage challenges, stressors and conflicts through discursive actions and reflections across cultures.

Finally, the findings support the research on identity (Arnett, 2000; Merino, 2004; Helm, 2017), highlighting that the participants aim at creating self-development through transcultural romantic love relationships, seeking to build a united, shared and/or even fused identity (Kühler, 2021; Merino, 2004). By increased self-reflection, but also by developing cultural identity aspects, partners in transcultural romantic love relationships create an “ontological dependence” and virtues (as described in Friedman, 1998). Participants in this study also mention “care” as one outstanding aspect of their identity development—as in Kühler (2021) and Friedman (1998)—in addition to protection, awareness, reflection of self and others, and future orientation. As emphasised in Solomon (1988), love is connected to dialectical experiences between autonomy and independence. In a transcultural romantic love relationship, this aspect of love is strongly reflected in the discourses on intrapersonal identity development, but also in the discourses on cultural identity development. This is expressed in discourses around, for instance, adjusting to culture, balancing identity aspects of self and others, defining the place and centre of life, and creating interpersonal identity aspects in the tension between the self and the other.

## Chapter 6

# Conclusions, Limitations and Recommendations



**Abstract** Chapter 6 presents conclusions, discusses the overall limitations of the study and gives recommendations for future research, theory building and practice.

The study has focused on interlinking three concepts; those being love, sense of coherence and identity development in transcultural romantic love relationships; by exploring the view of various participants of the study from various cultural backgrounds, origins, social and professional strata and places of birth and residence, who were in transcultural romantic relationships at the time of the interview.

It can be concluded that transcultural romantic relationships can significantly support the sense of coherence and the identity development, while the sense of coherence and identity development affect the development of the transcultural romantic love relationships. Through the strong relationship qualities, the positive feelings and the discursive actions, sense of coherence components are developed through fostering new perspectives and understanding of self and others, coping and manageability through actions and values, and meaningfulness that is based on intra- and interpersonal meaning creation, positive feelings and spirituality.

By creating growth through the transcultural romantic relationships, identity concepts are developed and new (shared) identity aspects are created. Accordingly, cultural identity aspects are encouraged, in addition to intra- and interpersonal identity development. The transcultural romantic relationships contribute to developing intercultural competences, cultural practices, religious and spiritual aspects and defining a new cultural centre of life.

The study supports previous research and expands on it, thereby augmenting the literature on transcultural romantic relationships, sense of coherence and identity development. It further contributes to filling the void in transcultural research on these three topics.

As in each and every research study, this study comes with limitations that relate to the focus in theory as well as the methodological design, paradigm and approach. This study is limited by the theoretical lens used, but also by the methodology applied. Further, the study is limited by the samples and sample size.

Based on this study, it is recommended that follow-up studies focus on deeper and broader exploration of transcultural romantic relationships. Qualitative, quantitative and mixed-method studies must be conducted in order to explore the relationships across various cultures in an in-depth manner. Life story research can also support the exploration of gender differences of individuals of different origins across the lifespan. Research needs to influence contributions to positive mental health and well-being in connection with the challenges and opportunities of transcultural romantic love relationships. Also, the national and sociocultural context in which the relationship takes place, and the impact this has on the relationship, need to be explored with special regard to legal, political and economic circumstances. Furthermore, the identity aspects and personality traits should be studied in more depth, along with their development across the lifetime in connection with the transcultural romantic love relationships. For complex theory building, a methodology of some complexity is required to capture the different aspects of the topic of research as fully and holistically as possible. Thereby, the study at hand can only be a start to provide directions for future research endeavours.

Transcultural romantic love relationships can also serve as indicators of societal transcultural ideas, stereotypes and power struggles. Therefore, future research may focus on the representation of power and power struggles in transcultural romantic love relationships which are anchored in socio-political, economic and legal structures and designs.

On a practical note, in view of growing cultural and intersectional diversity, it is recommended that individuals be prepared to communicate and interact more with other individuals of different cultural backgrounds and language competencies. Therefore, it is important that transcultural aspects play a role in the upbringing of people all over the world. Educational institutions should prepare individuals to develop intercultural competence and in so doing, make transcultural romantic relationships a reality and an accepted lifestyle. Individuals involved in transcultural romantic relationships could also be encouraged to share the opportunities and challenges of their relationships and how they manage and deal with differences on an intra- and interpersonal level. These best practices should be made available as positive examples of how to deal with differences and differentness, and how to create sameness while reflecting on cultural stereotypes and prejudices.

As highlighted by selected participants in this study; social media, TV documentaries and narrations (story-telling) could all be used to explain the upsides and downsides of transcultural romantic relationships and the underlying issues, while simultaneously creating a deeper understanding of love across cultures, the challenges these couples face, and their potential for growth on individual, and social levels.

Further, individual, family and couple counselling should take transcultural aspects into consideration. At the same time, awareness can be created of the difficulties of deciding where to live, how to live and how to manage the contact with both families of origin. Open seminars and counselling for couples from diverse backgrounds could be offered to prepare them for the potential challenges to their relationship in psychological, social and legal matters.

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