

An Ever-Fixed Mark? On the Symbolic Coping With the Fragility of Partner Relationships by Means of Padlocking

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Abstract: "Padlocking" is a quite recent phenomenon observable in many major cities in Europe and throughout the world. Couples engrave their initials or names on a padlock, fix it in a public place, preferably bridges, and throw the keys away. Locations like the Hohenzollern Bridge in Cologne, Germany, have become a hotspot for this practice, with thousands and thousands of padlocks covering the grids of the banisters. But what kind of practice is it that we are dealing with here? With an objective-hermeneutic approach, the symbolic meaning of the "love lock" and the practice involved is disclosed. Compared to common, legal practices of institutionalizing couple relationships, padlocking seems to explicitly accommodate the fragility of romantic attachments. In this, it is an attempt to perpetuate the feeling of being in love.

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1. What is "Padlocking"?

Rather unusual for sociological research, this article deals with an artifact. More precisely, I am going to look at a specific practice in which an artifact plays a decisive role: couples label padlocks with their names or initials and visibly install them in public places and especially at bridges. This has become a widespread custom in a relatively short period of time; today there is hardly any city without a padlocking spot anymore. In Germany it is particularly the Hohenzollern Bridge in Cologne (Fig. 1) that came to fame in the wake of this practice. Meanwhile there are so many padlocks placed here that Cologne has virtually gained yet another tourist attraction.

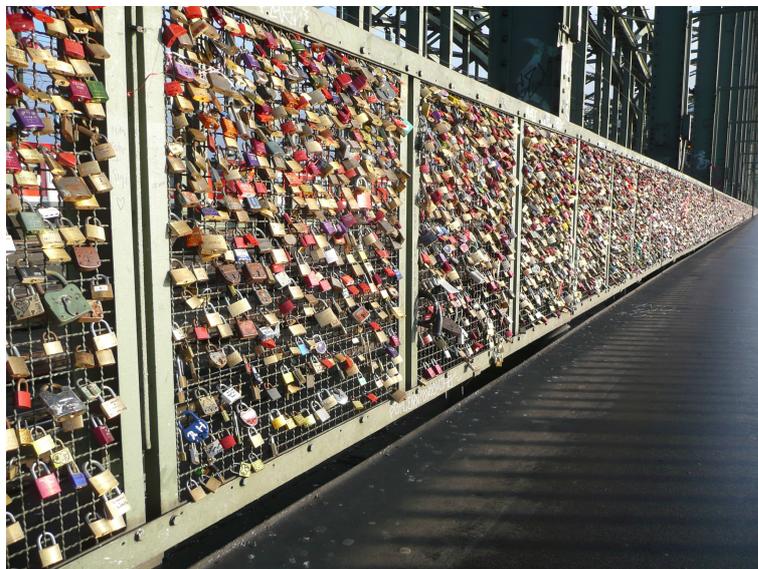


Figure 1: Padlocks at the Hohenzollern Bridge in Cologne, photographed in 2012 [1]

Sociologically, the phenomenon is interesting in various respects; for instance, one could investigate it as a new custom in the context of modernization theory, as an example of a paradox "invention of the traditional." But what we are interested in here is padlocking as an evident practice in partner relationships that can be assumed to be revealing with regard to the current state of this type of relationship—not least because of the phenomenal, rapid multiplying of padlocks, as we observe it in Cologne. If it is true that the first locks only appeared in 2008, then more than 150,000 exhibits have accumulated within only five years¹, and their number has been growing ever since. [2]

Obviously a new practice that finds so many followers in such a short period of time must be especially appealing; it must satisfy a need that otherwise is hard to

1 According to a count conducted by the Cologne edition of the newspaper *Bild*, published on October 23, 2012; in my own estimation, the number has increased even more in the meantime. The sheer number of padlocks even aroused the interest of the illegal scrap metal trade; as another newspaper, the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* reported on August 10, 2012, two padlock thieves were convicted in Cologne, the judge's reasoning being that the padlocks were not ownerless, but the couples had only deposited them. However, this might not be entirely correct, as the following analysis will show.

satisfy. The question is what kind of need we are dealing with here and what it says about current partner relationships. This question will be addressed in the following analysis, which expressly concentrates on the symbolic forms of the practice. There will thus be no reference to the group of persons performing the practice (e.g., age and social background of the partners), and neither will the subjective meaning be investigated that the participants attribute to the act. Instead, analysis remains at the level of the artifact: it is concerned with the meaning of the mysterious custom of padlocking as revealed in the very object the practice revolves around. When reconstructing the practice's structure of meaning this way, it should be said in advance that this structure will prove to be "over-determined," i.e., it is charged with a combination of elements constituting a complexity of meaning. It is assumed that this is part of its appeal to the participants. [3]

In the following pages, I will approach the symbolic form of the padlock, drawing on objective hermeneutics, in order to analyze the symbolic, structural implications of the practice as deducible from the artifact itself (Section 2). Against this backdrop I will deal with the question of how this symbolism is connected with the status of the partner relationships perpetuated by means of padlocking (Section 3). In accordance with the findings I will go on to discuss three specific dimensions of the symbolic meaning of the practice: protection against the risk of separation (Section 4), celebrating the "love of love" (Section 5), and padlocking as emotion work (Section 6). [4]

2. Cracking the Symbolic Meaning of the Padlock

From a layman's perspective a plausible access to the phenomenon of padlocking seems to be its origin. Obviously padlocking does not only occur in Germany, but also, for example, in Russia, France, and Italy. There are several sites in the U.S. too, from the Brooklyn Bridge (NY) to the town of Lovelock (NV).² Particularly in Italy the practice seems to have a longer history, and also couples in China have been sharing in the custom for years, although with certain modifications compared to the European practice.³ While several differing myths of origin are circulated on the internet, it is safe to say that we would not understand the practice any better even if the paths of its dissemination could be traced reliably. It would still remain to be clarified why it was this specific practice that spread around the world, and its very appeal could not be explained by an Italian or Chinese origin. Neither would it be helpful to investigate the subjective meaning that couples associate with the installing of padlocks when asked. Certainly their motives and thoughts are relevant for an extensive analysis of the phenomenon. But the self-conception of the protagonists would only be instructive when compared with the explicated objective meaning of the practice, serving as a background for interpretation. [5]

2 The website <https://www.makelovelocks.com/> provides a map with locations.

3 According to a private informant, preferred locations of padlocking in China are bridges crossing ravines, not rivers as in Europe.

The starting point of analysis must therefore be the investigation of the symbolic form itself, and the following considerations are guided by classic structuralist models of Claude LÉVI-STRAUSS (1977) and Pierre BOURDIEU (1976) who tried to do exactly this using the example of ritual masks and traditional architecture. A modern sociological method that offers a most useful approach to our problem is objective-hermeneutic sequence analysis.⁴ What it shares with the classic models is the purpose of an immanent reconstruction of meaning. Rather than adding to the classic models it also provides a sophisticated analytical method. Here, it does not seem necessary to introduce the method in detail; for one thing, I assume that the single steps of analysis can be deduced from the following reading, and that its depiction facilitates an intersubjective review of the results. Moreover, the usual descriptions of the method refer to the analysis of written texts, while in this case we are dealing with artifacts, which requires a slightly modified procedure.⁵ Nevertheless, particularly two of the basic maxims of Objective Hermeneutics will be pursued: the maxims of context-free and of literal interpretation. For the following analysis this means that it disregards the concrete situation and suspected symbolic meanings, and rather utilizes the "objective," i.e., context-independent, meaning of linguistic and non-linguistic markers in order to disclose the situative meaning. This specific kind of artifact analysis serves as a starting point of understanding the phenomenon of padlocking, broaching a new topic of sociological investigation.⁶ [6]

The data we are discussing here is the "love locks" (*Liebesschlösser*) installed at the Hohenzollern Bridge in Cologne. More exactly, we are looking at the totality of special things in this special location. In contrast to archaeology, we are not dealing with a few handed down artifacts or even fragments of artifacts, but with a plethora of objects which are part of a vivid social practice. It is a crucial task of analysis to successively determine what aspects are actually relevant to this practice. [7]

Concerning the padlocks that are of interest here, it seems to be relevant that they are attached to a rail bridge/skywalk in the historic district of Cologne. It is located near the Cologne Cathedral, the central railroad station and the philharmonic hall and leads across the Rhine. The rails in the center of the bridge are flanked by sidewalks on both sides; railway and sidewalks are separated by wire gratings for the entire length of the bridge. The padlocks are affixed to these wire gratings, with an increasing concentration of locks towards the middle of the bridge and, respectively, the middle of the river. There is a greater density of locks at the bridge's end west of the Rhine, i.e., close to the historic district and

4 An introduction to the method is, amongst others, given by MAIWALD (2005), OEVERMANN (1981, 2000), WERNET (2000, 2014).

5 Examples of an objective-hermeneutic artifact analysis are provided by JUNG (2006) and WERNET (2003).

6 Further research could include interviews with couples involved with the very practice (e.g., young and not so young lovers, newly and elderly married spouses, heterosexual and gay couples), ethnographic investigations, and historical and local comparisons of the practice. Another interesting perspective on the phenomenon would be a comparison and classification in the context of other forms of symbolic relationship affirmations (private and/or public, conventional and/or unconventional) in order to explore changes of meaning.

the Cologne Cathedral, while their number decreases towards the end east of the Rhine. Almost without exception, the padlocks are installed in the pedestrian area on the southern side of the bridge; on the northern side there are distinctly fewer locks, which apparently were attached only recently, probably because of the shortage of space on the southern side. [8]

Already these mainly geographic observations allow for the identification of three aspects in need of explanation for they are likely to be crucial as to the symbolic structure of the practice. First of all, the southern side of the bridge must be especially appealing to the padlockers. Second of all, the increased concentration of locks does not pose a problem for the actors—they are not aiming at an even, distance-oriented distribution. And thirdly, also the middle of the bridge must be particularly attractive. As for the relatively high density of locks west of the Rhine, it can be ascribed to external reasons that have nothing to do with the symbolic practice itself simply because more people access the bridge from the historic district and the main railroad station than the other way around. [9]

Initially, we can assume that the padlock-population of the bridge started in the middle, which in the beginning had a greater intrinsic meaning. The concentration of locks on the western side would thus be the result of the successful establishment of the custom, taking into account that only when the bridge itself had already been validated as the symbolic place of the practice, the padlocks could be installed anywhere. Yet in order to access the meanings connected with the bridge itself, its western side, and its middle part, it is useful to look at the padlocks and their design first. After all, they are the pivotal objects of the practice in question and thus the suitable data to start the sequential analysis of the totality of the practice. Of course, this does not mean that the location is negligible. But what makes it special here is precisely the profuse padlocking⁷ that obviously has little to do with the common way the object is used; apart from a few exemptions, the locks do not fixate or connect anything. [10]

But what is the "adequate" use of padlocks? With a padlock, you can lock up the hatch of a shed, a container or a locker; you can chain up a bicycle or a gate. And this is basically it, with other examples being merely a variation of the main theme, to lock up or to chain up. The function of a padlock is therefore quite specific. But how can it be characterized? First, we can say that a padlock connects two things that are otherwise not connected. This, however, is not simply a matter of fixture, even though in the case of the shed or the locker the mobile part is indeed fixated to the immobile part. But in order to do so, you would not necessarily need a padlock—a rope or a wire would also do the trick (as it is, in fact, often done in the case of the gate of a pasture fence to prevent the cattle or the wind from opening it). At any rate, in order to lock something up with a padlock, you need a connecting element, like a chain or a bolt. [11]

With regard to the practice in question, a first and maybe surprising conclusion is that the primary meaning of the padlock is not to connect, but to lock out. It is

⁷ In fact, not only bridges are used for the practice of padlocking, but also, for instance, lampposts or barriers.

meant to prevent access. If a gate is sealed with rope or a wire, it prevents the cattle from getting out; if it is furnished with lock and chain, it also prevents (unauthorized) persons from getting in. This function of exclusion is immanent in the object itself since you cannot use a padlock without using the key. Even if the shackle of modern padlocks can be arrested by pressing it down, it can only be re-opened with the matching key. [12]

The quite simple function of the padlock is thus to protect property from trespassers. At the same time, padlocks are not at all the exclusive way to do so. In most cases, the function is fulfilled by a lock that itself is part of the object to be protected: the doors of apartments or cars almost naturally have built-in locks and are usually not secured with chains and padlocks. Accordingly, on the one hand, padlocks mainly seem to come into use when a class of objects is concerned that are not (sufficiently) lockable by themselves, like buggies, bicycles, chairs on a terrace, or even the protester who chains herself to the tree threatened to be cut down. All these are mobile objects that in principle can be taken away and appropriated. A second class of objects prone to be padlocked are the already mentioned sheds, pastures, lockers and containers. What is conspicuous here is that these objects can also come in versions with doors with built-in locks. So what makes the difference here? One hypothesis that comes to mind comparing the apartment with the shed in the basement is that the shed might be less worthy of protection. Or putting it another way: In the case of the apartment it is generally implied that it is worth protecting, whereas in the case of the shed, this decision is up to the individual owner. This would even coincide with the respective doors themselves, often composed of slates or gratings in the case of the shed, but usually constructed solidly and opaquely in the case of the apartment. Factoring this in, padlocking seems to be a middle ground between a mere symbolic and a concrete, material protection of the object, which might depend on the value assigned to the things inside and the suspected risk of them being taken away. The constructibility of this middle ground is also met with the various versions of locks, the simplest versions of which not being at all effective in the face of forcible intrusion. Returning to the context of padlocking that we are concerned with here, it is now safe to say that on the Hohenzollern Bridge in Cologne padlocks are certainly not used to lock up a room so that they can only be associated with the first class of objects discussed above: the fixation of a mobile object in order to protect it from removal by unauthorized persons. [13]

In this context, it seems to be beneficial to reconsider the connective quality of the procedure of padlocking that we identified as a secondary function before. Padlocks always connect at least two things and in this gain the immanent function of a "copula," which indeed plays a role in the protection of mobile objects. Fixating a mobile object does not only mean to protect one's property, but the property is attached to another object—in a way that only the owner of the padlock can detach it again. Typically, the mobile object is hitched to an immobile one: a fence, a tree, a signpost etc. But since the immobile object can very well be in the possession of yet another owner, the practice of padlocking might also be regarded as a sort of usurpation of other people's property. At least in Germany, a thus invoked potential conflict often becomes visible in the form of

prohibition signs, for example warning people not to chain their bicycles to the fence. Accordingly, the secondary function of connection and the primary function of protection together create a side effect that can be characterized as a sort of occupation of the immobile object. This is important because this way, besides the exclusion of unauthorized persons, another component of social relations comes into play: there is an objective frame of reference with regard to space and the rights that third parties have to it. This circumstance is even appreciated in the social practice itself; for instance, some local administrations prohibit the attaching of padlocks and have them removed. Hence, we might even say that we are dealing with an "occupy movement." [14]

3. Padlocks and the Status of Partner Relationship

In the factual context of couple's padlocking it quickly becomes apparent that no object is fixated here: In the vast majority of cases only the locks themselves are installed.⁸ However, the padlocks coming into use here are different from usual ones in one distinctive respect they all have in common: they are furnished with names or initials. Against the backdrop of the normal manner of use, we initially might assume that the names indicate the owners, as one would tag a suitcase with one's name (and address) or label children's clothes when they are going on a class trip. However, there are contextual conditions at hand—objects might be confused or get lost—that can hardly be transferred to padlocks as there is no conceivable context in which they would be used in such a massive amount that it would be difficult for the respective holders to retrieve their own one.⁹ Consequently, the only remaining plausible interpretation is that it is the names themselves, or, more precisely, the bearers of the names, that are attached to the bridge by means of the padlocks. Considering that by far the greatest part of the padlockers are couples, we can now say that quite "literally," the couples attached themselves to the bridge. In fact, the couple itself is the mobile object that was affixed in the sense of the function of the padlock, which means that the explicated contextual conditions are actually met—we are just not dealing with physical, but with symbolic objects.¹⁰ [15]

Taking into account that the names and initials on the padlock symbolize the couple, its means of expression are severely limited due to the very shape of the lock. Mostly the denomination does not exceed the narrow space provided by the object, whereas the small surface only allows for short messages. Most of the

8 Only very rarely, plastic hearts or the like are installed together with the padlock.

9 Possible, but barely imaginable would be a sports club which would provide lockers to members to lock up with individual padlocks which, when not in use, are put on a special rack and therefore marked with individual names.

10 It can be assumed that the padlocks are "real" symbols, i.e., signifiers that already have a meaning (a *significatum*), but at the same time point to something else (like, for example, Sigmund FREUD's (1939) symbols of manifest dream content). This use of the term "symbol" is to be distinguished from the more universal one, which refers to meaningfulness in general, like, for instance, in G.H. MEAD's (1962 [1934]) use, when he mentions "significant symbols," or in BLUMER's (1986 [1969]) "symbolic interactionism." An example underlining the distinction: the word "death" is a significant symbol in this regard, a linguistic symbol, but it is not a symbol in the narrow sense. By contrast, the graphic depiction of a human skull is a figure (whose primary meaning is the depiction of a human skull), but can at the same time serve as a symbol for death.

couples abide to this limitation, which points to an established rule. Only very few couples deviate from this rule and attach a larger tin or plastic heart to their padlock, whereby they of course also occupy more space than the others. But while there are variations in shape and design, the names or initials are always the central part of the padlocks. Partly the names are applied with touch-up pens or felt pens, but by now, many locks are also furnished with a professionally applied engraving or inscription; in fact, a veritable couple-padlock industry appears to have emerged, providing ready-made products with different colors and fonts. Especially on these, but also on the self-made padlocks, we usually also find graphic symbols of attachment, like plus signs, the symbol "&,"¹¹ or interwoven hearts and wedding bands (Fig. 2).



Figure 2: Self-made padlocks and professionally manufactured ones at the Hohenzollern Bridge [16]

The different symbols of attachment support the thesis that the padlock itself is not a sufficient symbol of the relationship: the partner relationship remains to be expressed. And this seems to be important since the locks are always installed in a way that the names and symbols are visible. Looking at it as a speech act, "Nicole & Marcel" would then mean "We are a couple." This speech act would be addressed at everyone passing the location,¹² and it would thus be the public declaration of the partner relationship.¹³ [17]

- 11 It is no surprise that "and" is typically not used and would demand a further determination. "Nicole and Marcel" could be complemented with "love each other," but also with "don't like each other," "are great athletes," or "come from Germany." The plus sign, by contrast, is more distinct. It makes Nicole and Marcel elements of a sum. Also the symbol "&" indicates a bond, while it is instructive here that, according to orthographic rules, it is applied to a specific class of social relations, namely business relations—in German, it is also called the "merchant's 'and'." The relation thus becomes a business partnership, and Nicole and Marcel become a team. A question that cannot be answered here is that of the role of the padlock-industry in the development of symbol usage.
- 12 Whereas, strictly speaking, the authorship cannot be definitely accredited since we do not know for sure whether it was really Nicole and Marcel who placed the message. A text like "Nicole + Marcel" written on the wall of a school bathroom or a bus shelter could also mean "They are a couple," written by someone who wanted to tease them.
- 13 This refers to explicit announcements in the form of speech acts, and not to behavior that could be interpreted accordingly (like kissing, holding hands, etc.).

In this form the practice appears to bear similarities with engagement or wedding announcements in the newspaper, but also with the banns, i.e., the public announcement of an intention to marry, or with a marriage announcement in a parish newsletter. But the practice we are dealing with is different in two crucial respects. For one thing, the "formal" announcement explicitly refers to an event that took place or is going to take place: the wedding in a church and/or at city hall, i.e., an institutional event in the common sociological sense. In the cases mentioned above a social status transformation has taken place that is conveyed to those who did not participate in the public act. Furthermore, and in accordance with the previous observation, the institutional event includes the disclosure of the couple's full names and thus the exposure of their civil identity. The padlocking practice, however, does not notably refer to an institutional coupling event, and the padlocks do normally only contain first names or initials. For an outsider, it is therefore neither obvious nor retraceable who "N" and "M" might be; this is only comprehensible to Nicole and Marcel and possibly other insiders, despite the fact that we are confronted with this message in a public place. We can thus conclude that the unique symbolic meaning of the practice does not at all consist in an institutional act for the purpose of a wedding. [18]

Against this backdrop, another quality of the padlocking comes into view, namely the similarities of the padlock design with couple's graffiti at bus stops and on (school) walls or—in the classic variety—with tree inscriptions. Obviously, this points to quite different pragmatics. In earlier times, it would have been a compensatory act of couples who, being not married or not allowed to marry (due to age, class, previous engagements, etc.), could not own up to their relationship and, accordingly, not live it openly without risking sanctions. The risk of sanctions enforces secrecy, which is then expressed in the text of the love message. In this case, it seems natural that this "secrecy in public" also offers some sort of secondary gain: Could there be a better measure of true love than how much you are willing to risk for it? [19]

Nowadays, however, the conditions are different: partner relationships can be acted out publicly regardless of, for example, age or (with qualifications) sexual orientation. Also in the case of padlocking it becomes apparent that the inherent secrecy is not owed to social risk management, considering the site of the practice being a public, highly frequented location. Moreover, padlocking does not happen in the dead of night, but in broad daylight. Apparently it is even a vital aspect of the practice that it is performed in a busy, popular space, and not at a random bridge somewhere in an industrial area or a nature reserve. The very contradiction that is created by choosing a public location to place a pointedly intimate message reveals a striking ambivalence of the practice. [20]

4. Symbolic Meaning and the Risk of Separation

It is important to note that the padlocking message, much like the one carved in the tree, is not fleeting, but permanently fixed.¹⁴ The announcement of the couple status is virtually set in stone. It cannot be erased or taken away, while at the same time, the very medium of choice indicates that the meaning of the message points to the internal relation between the partners, not the couple's external relation to the public. It is not merely that the couple speaks as a couple, but what they say is important for their relationship: the padlock expresses a status marker for the couple, and this way, the practice can be understood as a new form of coping with the problem of self-institutionalization of the partner relationship (MAIWALD, 2009). This means that within the relationship itself it is imperative to establish and to fixate its status ("We are a couple," as opposed to, for example, "We are having an affair"). Even when external status markers become less important, the dynamic of couple relationships entails transformations that are institutional for the partners in the sense that they imply a certain normative status. This is what *self*-institutionalization refers to. Partly this occurs in the cooperative practice itself, like establishing joint activities (including a "right" to such activities), mutually introducing the new partner to friends and parents or moving in together. But especially important are the couple's self-referential actions consolidating their relationship status. This starts with the mutual confession of love, proceeds to celebrating the anniversary of the beginning of the relationship, and culminates in the establishment of a couple's myth, i.e., an elaborated biographic narrative about how the two persons have met and became a couple (BURKART, 2009). In this regard, the practice of padlocking extends the cultural repertoire by means of a new variation of the declarative "We are a couple." [21]

But this symbolic meaning can only be attributed to the padlock if it features a specific characteristic of the classic love graffiti: the message has to participate in the immobility of the medium, which is basically the case here, but with a crucial qualification: the padlock's color and engraving are permanent, as is the wire grating on top of the bridge, but the padlock itself is mobile—and thus is the message. Therefore, the structure of meaning of self-institutionalization stringently requires the deletion of the artifact's mobility. And this only works if the couple, after installing the lock, gets rid of the key(s). Consequently, the lock does not represent the loving bond like a wedding band would do, which symbolizes a link in a chain. Instead, the padlock represents the foundation of the bond, the act of will, quite similar to the answer "Yes" to the question "Will you ..." at a church wedding or to the signature during the civil marriage ceremony. However, the quality of the act of will still adheres to the new symbol due to the structure of meaning of the artifact. What can be locked can be unlocked, and only by means of the symbolic precaution of removing the keys, the meaning of the padlock includes its owners: the couple secures their relationship against themselves. It is not so much the others who need to be prevented from taking "us" away (and thus eliminating "us"), but it is "us" who have to be prevented from

¹⁴ In Franz SCHUBERT's song cycle *Winterreise* ("A Winter Journey") it is characteristic of the singer's desperate situation that he carves his and his lover's name into the ice of the river.

doing so. This way, the bond itself appears to be precarious as it is terminable any time. The practice of padlocking promises a symbolic safety measure and simultaneously symbolizes the very danger one has to provision against. [22]

A part of symbolizing the risk of separation is the dramatization of the separating element. Not least the bridge used for padlocking reproduces this structure as the opposite shore is originally unreachable. Thus the bridge also stands for the great effort that had to be made in order to connect the two riversides solely at this one specific point, while overall, crossing over the river remains unlikely. Accordingly, the choice of the bridge can be accounted for by the symbolization of the connection. Leading over a great river, it performs the function of symbolic support more conveniently than it would if it crossed a narrow creek. The river as the separating element is obviously also more drama than a freeway or a railway would be, being a natural force and the very symbol of the course of life. Against this backdrop, the padlockers' preference for the middle of the bridge can also be explained since it is the ideal endpoint of mutually approaching one another from two equidistant starting points. Finally, throwing the keys into the river from the middle of the bridge supports the irrevocability of the decision as the river is deepest here and the shore farthest away. [23]

Through these symbolic supporting measures, a structural factor of padlocking is reproduced that already became apparent in its meaning of securing the status of the relationship against itself: considering the magnitude of the separating element, the self-institutionalization of the couple is not just precarious anymore, it is staged as a downright improbable event. In other words, the practice at hand represents the acknowledgment of the fragility of the relationship. This perception is expressed in the symbolic activities of counteraction, which, by the way, can also be found in the symbolic staging of the church wedding. The sociological standard interpretation of marriage as an "institution" refers to qualities like longevity and non-terminability. But when the priest declares that what God has joined together, no man shall put asunder, it is of course the possibility of separation that is made present in the performance. Historically, the addressees of the potential separation might not have been the couple, but the kinship groups of the spouses.¹⁵ In the context we are dealing with, however, it is the couple itself that experiences the relationship status as basically improbable. [24]

This structural hypothesis is furthermore confirmed by another, not yet considered aspect of the expressive design of the padlocks. Many padlocks (particularly the professionally fabricated ones) mention a date (day, month, year), which, against the backdrop of analysis so far, can only mean two things: either the day of the (subjectively appreciated) establishment of the relationship, or the day when the lock was installed. The difference, however, is leveled when considering that the very installation of the padlock is an element of self-institutionalization. But what is interesting here are the not so rare cases of padlocks mentioning years that date back to a time when the bridge was not even used for padlocking yet, and therefore had to be installed by couples who felt the

¹⁵ For instance, GOODY (1983) interprets the sacrament of marriage as being directed against the pre-Christian marriage between two clans, which in the course was demoted to engagement.

need to institutionally revive the relationship. It is this need that indicates the perception of the relationship as improbable and fragile. [25]

In the context of the symbolic securing of a relationship status perceived as fragile, a further aspect of the specific padlocking location discussed here comes to mind: the vicinity to the Cologne Cathedral. It is the prominent building you see from the south side of the bridge, and it is not only an impressive (more or less) medieval construction, but in the cultural memory of the Germans, it is the church par excellence. The symbolic practice of padlocking might participate in the scenery at least regarding the atmosphere of a supporting symbolic force. Although it is not an institutionalization in the church, it is as self-institutionalization "overshadowed" by the church. [26]

5. The Love of Love

What remains to be clarified is, on the one hand, the meaning of the multitude of padlocks, and, on the other hand, the ambivalent relation to the public that can be associated with padlocking; content-wise, there seems to be a discrepancy between the intimate communication and the public place where it is performed, which finds its practical expression in the usurpation of a public place. We already know that the presence of other locks does not prevent the couples from installing their own one; the population of the bridge did not take place analogous to the occupation of coffee shop tables, where you would seek the greatest possible distance to the next guest, if you had the choice. On the Hohenzollern Bridge, however, free spaces were not preferred—on the contrary, it seems that the vicinity to other padlocks was explicitly sought. There are some spots with such a density of locks that the single ones almost disappear into the crowd; incidentally, this is also what constitutes the aesthetic appeal to outsiders: a multitude of colorful objects sparkling in the sun. But why is such an intimate, inwardly directed practice not accompanied by a need for individual space? This question seems all the more vital as, at least in the German context, the wedding ceremony is a most special individual celebration—there is no need for mass weddings (yet), which would certainly undermine the uniqueness of the event for the single couple. On the Hohenzollern Bridge this uniqueness is not explicitly claimed and maybe even avoided, which then must be interpreted as the expression of a moment of communitization (Fig. 3).



Figure 3: The sheer amount and concentration of padlocks underlines the communitizing character of the practice [27]

In order to reconstruct the quality of communitization taking place here, we can draw on the ambivalence between intimate communication and the public marking of the relationship status: the practice is an attempt to connect what in the common customs seems to be separated by definition.¹⁶ After all, the installation of a padlock is invariably an expression of the couple's love. But what is the meaning of such a public and collective way of expressing it? According to Niklas LUHMANN (1982, 2008), a certain reflexivity is a crucial part of the modern, passionate conception of love. We are not simply in love with somebody, but we also *love to love*. Even more: before ever having cathected an object of love, love itself is being cathected.¹⁷ This reflexivity is constitutive of a cultivation of romantic love, and it is also constitutive of a certain kind of communitization: a community of lovers. This is what the dense clustering of thousands of padlocks displays. The padlocking couples literally sign themselves in to this community. It is striking that the outcome of the practice of padlocking not merely symbolizes the community of lovers, but simultaneously represents the romantic motive of merger—the single couple merges in the community of all couples. It is in this

16 The civil marriage in itself is not an expression of love, while the church wedding gains this quality only by means of the kiss at the end of the ceremony ("You may kiss the bride"). It is rather likely that this is primarily an invention of the media.

17 One striking aspect of LUHMANN's (1982) idea is that the love to love gives way to love objects that, so to say, "come undone," that are not by all general standards loveable. Love is thus not confined to an elite class of objects that, in principle, deserve to be loved by everyone, but is at once democratized and individualized: everybody can be loved, and what is essential is that it is *my* love.

joint celebration of romantic love in general (not just that of the individual couple) that the idea of being in love with love becomes tangible.¹⁸ It further contributes to the "institutional security" of the assurance of status, being not only a private celebration "for us" but a pointed performance "as part of the community of lovers." To put it in another way: the fixing of a padlock in public is not only a projection and confirmation of the fact that "we are lovers" but simultaneously a gratification along the lines of "*in doing so, we are lovers.*" [28]

This brings us back to the profoundly ambivalent attitude towards the public that comes to light in the individual as well as in the collective practice of padlocking. On the one hand, the couples seek an exposed public place, while on the other hand, in a structurally violent act of occupation, the public is excluded in two different ways: linguistically, because the practice remains intimate communication (first names and initials), and physically because of the characteristics of the artifact (third parties cannot open the lock). On the Hohenzollern Bridge, the violence is clearly mitigated as from an aesthetic point of view, nothing is being destroyed. The appearance of the bridge is not tarnished, the view is not blocked, and also the railings do not have an aesthetic quality that would be impaired by the padlocks. This might be yet another reason for the appeal of the specific location. At other places, the matter is treated very differently, as the already mentioned bans and removals of padlocks show. [29]

Still, this only highlights the issue of ambivalence but does not solve it. Here, I can offer only a first attempt towards an explanation. With the public transgression being an integral part of padlocking, the practice consequently involves a *claim* on transgression. However, from an observer's point of view, this claim is solely based on the fact that the owners of the padlocks are lovers, suggesting that a couple is downright entitled to society's appreciating acknowledgment of their relationship. Following this line of argumentation, padlocking would not be so different from related phenomena like bachelor/bachelorette rallies where passers-by are asked (some might say: hassled) for donations to the party. In both cases, the subjective extraordinariness of the event—the status passage into a long-term love relationship—is claimed to be publicly, and thus "objectively," relevant. [30]

6. Padlocking as "Emotion Work"?

What can we say about the current constitution of the partner relationship when considering padlocking as its most recent expression? For some time now, the establishment of such a relationship has not been a biographical turning point anymore, which traditionally was marked as a status passage in the form of a wedding. Nowadays, pairing is a continuous, prolonged process of successively getting to know each other, scanning and probing, and coming to an agreement. In this, the relationship remains on probation as the process can be terminated at

18 By the by, there is a location where a quite similar collective celebration of the lovers' community takes place: a wall close to the home of Giulietta Capuleti (the Juliet from William SHAKESPEARE's "Romeo and Juliet") in Verona, Italy, where lovers leave messages similar to those on the padlocks in Cologne.

any point in time (BURKART, 1997). The maintenance of the relationship, on the other hand, has primarily become the business of the couple itself since externally stabilizing aspects like economic dependency (of women) or normative ties (the "sacredness" of marriage) have lost importance. Relationship management thus requires some effort particularly in terms of self-assurance with regard to the relationship status. The padlock signifies this status by contributing to the self-institutionalization of the relationship, which then again at least has to be rendered visible to outsiders. [31]

Moreover, the symbolic staging of the improbability of the relationship and the endeavor of securing it refer to a fragility of modern partner relationships that does not only keep social scientists busy. We cannot tell by the analysis of the artifacts alone what, for their owners, is constitutive of fragility, whether, e.g., the normality of separation and divorce, and an awareness of it play a major role, as especially individualization theorists suppose.¹⁹ But we can tell they confirm, at least in a way, the often diagnosed growing importance of the loving emotion for the maintenance of couple relationships. For it is the emotion itself that padlocking seeks to institutionalize: the assured status is that of a couple in love. [32]

Is padlocking thus "emotion work" in the sense of consciously working on one's emotions in the light of feeling rules and norms, as Arlie HOCHSCHILD (1979, 1983, 2013) conceives the concept? Perhaps not in a strict meaning. But in a somewhat broader sense, the padlocking couples indeed try to live up to standards of feeling rules in the form of adopting the notion of romantic love and by means of displaying their love of love. Moreover, though we cannot infer from the practice of padlocking that the actors are working on their feelings *for each other*, we can definitely state that the practice implies working on one's feelings *toward the relationship itself*. [33]

Beyond such considerations, however, it remains an essential quality of padlocking that the lock represents the establishment of the relationship qua decision in a very distinctive way because the option to end the relationship is excluded by means of throwing away the keys, but simultaneously included as a contingency that shapes the procedure. By removing the keys, their owners become the very third parties against whom their property—the relationship—has to be secured. Consequently, the establishment and maintenance of the relationship remain in the mode of improbability. And this way, the padlock finally is not only an answer to, but also an expression of the fragility of the modern partner relationship. It conjures up the very threat it attempts to ward off. In this sense, the love lock always comes with a bolt cutter. [34]

¹⁹ See GIDDENS (1992), but also, e.g., BECK and BECK-GERNSHEIM (1990), BECK-GERNSHEIM (2000), PEUCKERT (2012).

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