

Triangular theory of love

The **triangular theory of love** is a theory of love developed by psychologist Robert Sternberg. In the context of interpersonal relationships, "the three components of love, according to the triangular theory, are an intimacy component, a passion component, and a decision/commitment component."

1. Intimacy – Which encompasses feelings of attachment, closeness, connectedness, and bondedness.
2. Passion – Which encompasses drives connected to both limerence and sexual attraction.
3. Commitment – Which encompasses, in the short term, the decision to remain with another, and in the long term, plans made with that other.

"The amount of love one experiences depends on the absolute strength of these three components, and the type of love one experiences depends on their strengths relative to each other." Different stages and types of love can be explained as different combinations of these three elements; for example, the relative emphasis of each component changes over time as an adult romantic relationship develops. A relationship based on a single element is less likely to survive than one based on two or three elements.

Early theories of love

One of the first theories of love was developed by Sigmund Freud. As Freud so frequently attributed human nature to subconscious and unconscious desires, his theory of love centered around the need for an "ego ideal."^[1] His definition of an ego ideal is this: the image of the person that one wants to become, which is patterned after those whom one holds with great respect.

Another theory was introduced by Maslow. Maslow's hierarchy of needs places self-actualization at the peak. He maintains that those who have reached self-actualization are capable of love.

Yet another theory, one about Being love, was developed by Reik. Being in love was said to be attainable for those who could love for the sake of loving people, not just fixing one's own problem.

When theories about love moved from being clinically based to being socially and personality based, they became focused on types of love, as opposed to becoming able to love.

Elaboration of Sternberg's triangular theory of love

Sternberg's triangular theory of love was developed after the identification of passionate love and companionate love. Passionate love and companionate love are different kinds of love but are connected in relationships.

Passionate love is associated with strong feelings of love and desire for a specific person. This love is full of excitement and newness. Passionate love is important in the beginning of the relationship and typically lasts for about a year. There is a chemical component to passionate love. Those experiencing passionate love are also experiencing increased neurotransmitters, specifically phenylethylamine. In Phenylethylamine, also known as PEA, is also found in chocolate, which has been found to be an aphrodisiac.

Companionate love follows passionate love. Companionate love is also known as affectionate love. When a couple reaches this level of love, they feel mutual understanding and care for each other. This love is important for the survival of the relationship.

Sternberg created his triangle next. The triangle's points are intimacy, passion, and commitment.

Intimate love is the corner of the triangle that encompasses the close bonds of loving relationships. Intimate love felt between two people means that they each feel a sense of high regard for each other. They wish to make each other happy, share with each other, be in communication with each other, help when one is in need. A couple with intimate love deeply values each other. Intimate love has been called the "warm" love because of the way it brings two people close together. Sternberg's prediction of this love was that it would diminish as the relationship became less

interrupted, thus increasing predictability.

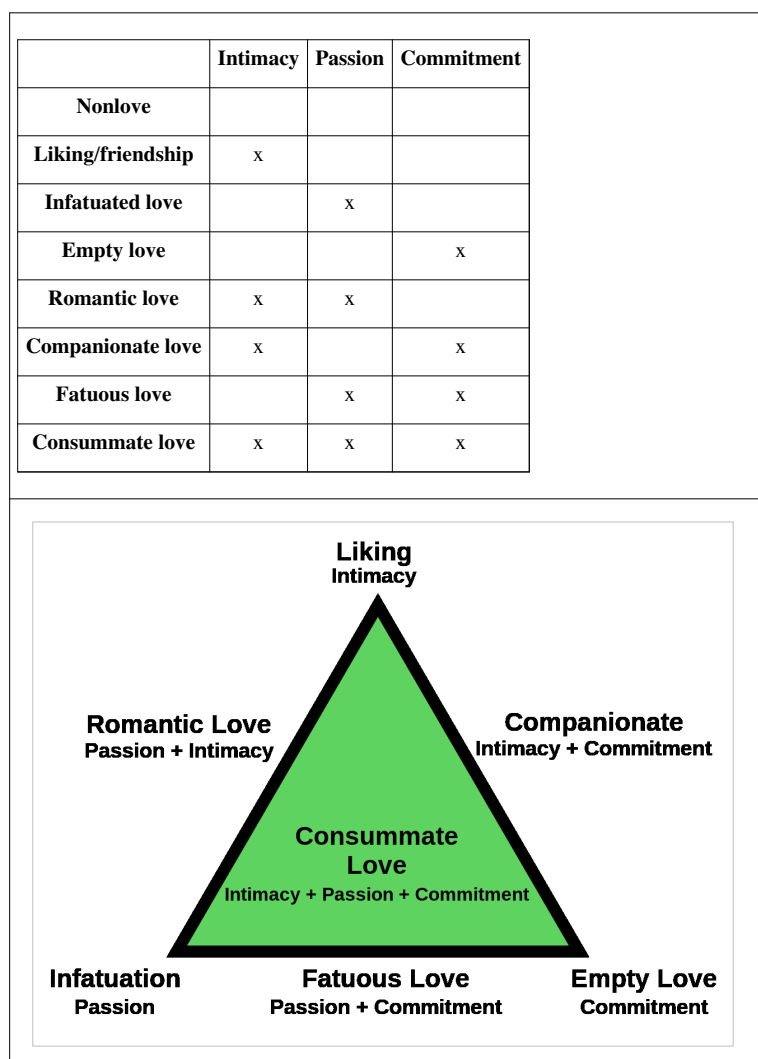
Passionate love is based on drive. Couples in passionate love feel physically attracted to each other. Sexual desire is typically a component of passionate love. Passionate love is not limited to sexual attraction, however. It is a way for couples to express feelings of nurture, dominance, submission, self-actualization, etc. Passionate love is considered the "hot" component of love because of the strong presence of arousal between two people. Sternberg believed that passionate love will diminish as the positive force of the relationship is taken over by opposite forces. This idea comes from Solomon's opponent-force theory.

Commitment, or committed love, is for lovers who are committed to being together for a long period of time. Something to note about commitment, however, is that one can be committed to someone without feeling love for him or her, and one can feel love for someone without being committed to him or her. Commitment is considered to be the "cold" love because it does not require either intimacy or passion. Sternberg believed that committed love increases in intensity as the relationship grows.

Sternberg believed love to progress and evolve in predictable ways; that all couples in love will experience intimate, passionate, and committed love in the same patterns.

It is important to note that although these types of love may contain qualities that exist in non-loving relationships, they are specific to loving relationships. A description of non-love is listed below, along with the other kinds of love. These kinds of love are combinations of one or two of the three corners of Sternberg's triangle of love.

Forms of love



The three components, pictorially labeled on the vertices of a triangle, interact with each other and with the actions they produce so as to form seven different kinds of love experiences (nonlove is not represented). The size of the triangle functions to represent the "amount" of love—the bigger the triangle, the greater the love. The shape of the triangle functions to represent the "style" of love, which may vary over the course of the relationship:

- **Nonlove** "refers simply to the absence of all three components of love. Nonlove characterizes the large majority of our personal relationships, which are simply casual interactions."^[2]
- **Liking/friendship** is "used here in a nontrivial sense. Rather, it refers to the set of feelings one experiences in relationships that can truly be characterized as friendship. One feels closeness, bondedness, and warmth toward the other, without feelings of intense passion or long-term commitment.
- **Infatuated love**: "infatuation results from the experiencing of passionate arousal in the absence of intimacy and decision/commitment...like Tennov's limerance."^[3] Romantic relationships often start out as infatuated love and become romantic love as intimacy develops over time. Without developing intimacy or commitment, infatuated love may disappear suddenly.
- **Empty love** is characterized by commitment without intimacy or passion. A stronger love may deteriorate into empty love. In an arranged marriage, the spouses' relationship may begin as empty love and develop into another form, indicating "how empty love need not be the terminal state of a long-term relationship...[but] the beginning rather than the end."
- **Romantic love** "derives from a combination of the intimate and passionate components of love...romantic lovers are not only drawn physically to each other but are also bonded emotionally" - bonded both intimately and passionately, but without sustaining commitment.
- **Companionate love** is an intimate, non-passionate type of love that is stronger than friendship because of the element of long-term commitment. "This type of love is observed in long-term marriages where passion is no longer present" but where a deep affection and commitment remain. The love ideally shared between family members is a form of companionate love, as is the love between close friends who have a platonic but strong friendship.
- **Fatuous love** can be exemplified by a whirlwind courtship and marriage - "fatuous in the sense that a commitment is made on the basis of passion without the stabilizing influence of intimate involvement."
- **Consummate love** is the complete form of love, representing an ideal relationship which people strive towards. Of the seven varieties of love, consummate love is theorized to be that love associated with the "perfect couple." According to Sternberg, these couples will continue to have great sex fifteen years or more into the relationship, they cannot imagine themselves happier over the long-term with anyone else, they overcome their few difficulties gracefully, and each delight in the relationship with one other.^[4] However, Sternberg cautions that maintaining a consummate love may be even harder than achieving it. He stresses the importance of translating the components of love into action. "Without expression," he warns, "even the greatest of loves can die."^[5] Thus, consummate love may not be permanent. If passion is lost over time, it may change into companionate love.

Mixed support for the triangular theory

In a study done by Michele Acker and Mark Davis in 1992, Sternberg's triangular theory of love was tested for validity. By studying a population that extended outside the typically studied group of 18 to 20 year old college students, Acker and Davis were able to study more accurately the stages of love in people. Some criticism of Sternberg's theory of love is that although he predicted the stages of a person's love for another person, he did not specify a time or point in the relationship when the stages would evolve. He does not specify whether the different parts of love are dependent on duration of relationship or on the particular stage that relationship has reached. Acker and Davis point out that the stage and duration of the relationship are potentially important to the love component and explore them.

They find that there are no exact answers because not only each couple, but each individual in the couple experiences love in a different way. There are three perceptions of the triangular theory of love, or "the possibility of multiple triangles." Multiple triangles can exist because individuals can experience each component of love (or point of the triangle) more intensely than another. These separate triangles, according to Acker and Davis and many others, are 'real' triangles, 'ideal' triangles, and 'perceived' triangles.

These 'real' triangles are indicative of how each individual views the progress and depth of his or her relationship. The 'ideal' triangles are indicative of each individual's ideal qualities of his or her partner/relationship. The 'perceived' triangles are indicative of each individual's ideas of how his or her partner is viewing the relationship. If any of these three separate triangles do not look the same as a person's partner's triangles, dissatisfaction is likely to increase.

Sternberg's triangular theory of love may not be as simple as he initially laid it out to be. Sternberg measured his theory on couples who were roughly the same age (mean age of 28) and whose relationship duration was roughly the same (4 to 5 years). His sample size was limited in characteristic variety. Acker and Davis announced this issue as being one of three major problems with Sternberg's theory. Romantic love, in particular, is not often the same in undergraduate level couples as couples who are not undergrads. Acker and Davis studied a sample that was older than Sternberg's sample of undergraduates.

The two other most obvious problems with Sternberg's theory of love are as follows. The first is a question of the separate nature of the levels of love. The second is a question of the measures that have previously been used to assess the three levels of love.

These problems with Sternberg's theory are still studied today. Sternberg created a model that has been used, questioned, explored, and accepted for many years and probably many more to come.

References

- [1] 3.0.CO;2-4
- [2] Sternberg, in *Close Relationships* p. 266
- [3] Sternberg, in *Close Relationships* p. 268
- [4] "Cupid's Arrow - the Course of Love through Time" by Robert Sternberg. Publisher: Cambridge University Press (1998) ISBN 0-521-47893-6
- [5] Robert J. Sternberg, "Liking versus Loving" *Psychological Bulletin* (1987) p. 341

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