

Triangular Theory Of Love

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Primary Disciplinary Field(s): Psychology, Social Psychology, Relationship Studies

Proponents: Robert Sternberg

1. Core Principles

The **Triangular Theory Of Love**, conceptualized by psychologist Robert Sternberg in 1986, serves as a comprehensive model designed to articulate the complexities and variations inherent in human love and intimate relationships. Sternberg posited that love is not a monolithic emotion but rather a phenomenon constructed from the dynamic interplay of three primary psychological components, represented visually as the vertices of a triangle. These components--Intimacy, Passion, and Commitment--combine in different strengths and configurations across time, leading to the diverse array of relational experiences observed in romantic partnerships.

A central tenet of the theory is that the relative presence or absence of these three elements defines the qualitative experience of love at any given moment. For a relationship to be robust, satisfying, and enduring, all three components must ideally be present in balance, resulting in what Sternberg termed **consummate love**. The theory emphasizes the dynamic nature of love, recognizing that the strength of these components fluctuates, particularly as a relationship matures from its initial, passionate stages into a long-term, committed bond.

2. Historical Development

Prior to Sternberg's formal articulation of the triangular model, psychological understanding of love often focused on simpler dichotomies, such as differentiating between passionate love and companionate love. Sternberg sought to create a more nuanced framework that could account for the vast spectrum of human bonding. His work originated within the broader context of cognitive psychology and intelligence studies, but he applied his analytical approach to the realm of emotion and interpersonal relationships.

The theory gained rapid academic and popular acceptance due to its clarity and empirical testability. It offered researchers a structured way to measure and compare different relational states and provided couples with a vocabulary to understand why their relationships might feel satisfying, strained, or incomplete. Sternberg initially detailed this concept in his seminal 1986 paper, "A Triangular Theory of Love," which provided the foundation for subsequent decades of research into relationship dynamics and longevity.

3. Key Components of Love

The three fundamental components forming the vertices of the love triangle are defined by distinct

psychological and behavioral characteristics that contribute unequally to the overall experience of love:

Intimacy: This component involves the feelings of closeness, bondedness, and connectedness in a relationship. It encompasses the emotional investment that leads to the sharing of thoughts, feelings, and personal details. Intimacy provides the warmth, mutual understanding, and security essential for deep, trusting relationships.

Passion: Passion represents the drives that lead to romance, physical attraction, sexual consummation, and related phenomena. It is the intense, often immediate, emotional and motivational state associated with infatuation and intense desire. This component tends to fluctuate most dramatically, often peaking early in a relationship due to novelty and physiological arousal, and potentially declining thereafter.

Commitment: Commitment is composed of two primary parts: the short-term decision to love someone, and the long-term decision to maintain that love. It is the cognitive component of the theory, representing the resolve to stay with the partner "through good time and bad," and involves loyalty, investment, and planning for the future of the relationship despite temporary difficulties or external temptations.

4. The Eight Types of Love

By assessing the presence (or absence) of these three components--Intimacy (I), Passion (P), and Commitment (C)--Sternberg identified eight distinct forms of love, each occupying a unique position within the conceptual triangle. These combinations illustrate the complexity of human bonding beyond simple attraction:

Non-love (None): The complete absence of all three components. This describes casual, non-interpersonal interactions or acquaintanceships.

Liking (I only): Characterized by **intimacy** alone, without passion or commitment. This describes true friendships where closeness and warmth exist but are not sexual or exclusive.

Infatuation (P only): Defined by **passion** without intimacy or commitment. This is often the experience of "love at first sight," characterized by intense physiological arousal, obsession, and strong desire, which can appear suddenly and fade quickly.

Empty Love (C only): Involves **commitment** alone, typically found in long-term relationships where the physical attraction and emotional closeness have vanished, or in arranged marriages where a bond is initiated without initial affection.

Romantic Love (I + P): Contains both **intimacy** and **passion**, but lacks long-term commitment. This type of love is often intensely physical and emotionally close, but lacks the intentional decision to stay permanently, common in nascent or intense short-term pairings.

Companionate Love (I + C): Characterized by **intimacy** and **commitment**, without passion. This love is often found in long-lasting marriages where passion has decreased, or among deeply

connected, platonic friends who share a long history and mutual investment.

Fatuous Love (P + C): Possesses **passion** and **commitment**, but lacks intimacy. This relationship often involves whirlwind courtships and immediate marriage, based on strong desire and mutual agreement to commit, but lacking the emotional grounding and self-disclosure required for sustainable communication.

Consummate Love (I + P + C): The ideal form, encompassing all three components--**intimacy**, **passion**, and **commitment**. Achieving consummate love is difficult, and maintaining it requires conscious effort by both partners, as balances shift over time and external pressures mount.

5. Applications and Dynamic Measurement

The primary application of Sternberg's theory lies in providing a diagnostic and descriptive framework for understanding relational satisfaction and longevity. By mapping the perceived strengths of the three components onto the conceptual triangle, individuals, couples, and relationship counselors can gain insight into the relationship's current state. For example, a couple experiencing **fatuous love** (high Passion and Commitment, low Intimacy) might be advised to work on building deeper emotional intimacy and self-disclosure, while a long-married couple facing **companionate love** (high Intimacy and Commitment, low Passion) might focus on rekindling shared novelty and sexual desire.

The theory is further vital for explaining the dynamic lifecycle of relationships. It suggests that love is not static; rather, the configuration of the triangle is constantly changing. Relationships typically begin with high passion and moderate intimacy, transition into stages where commitment and intimacy become dominant, and then ideally stabilize into the balanced state of consummate love. Understanding this dynamic fluctuation helps partners manage expectations regarding the inevitable ebb and flow of passionate intensity over decades.

6. Criticisms and Limitations

While widely influential, the Triangular Theory of Love is subject to several academic critiques regarding its scope and measurement. One primary limitation revolves around its cultural generalizability. Critics argue that the heavy emphasis on individual choice and highly differentiated components of love may not translate universally across all cultures, particularly those where arranged marriages or strong familial obligations heavily influence the structure of relationships and the cognitive component of **commitment**.

Another debate centers on the conceptual distinctiveness of the three components. Some researchers utilizing factor analysis have found that the concepts of intimacy and commitment, while theoretically separate, often overlap significantly in practical psychological measurement, suggesting they might not be entirely independent factors. Furthermore, the definition of **passion**

often focuses heavily on physical and sexual desire, potentially overlooking non-sexual forms of intense emotional bonding, like shared creative energy or intellectual synergy, that might also characterize powerful loving relationships.

Further Reading

[Triangular Theory of Love - Wikipedia](#)

[Official Website of Robert J. Sternberg](#)

[Sternberg's Triangular Theory of Love - Psychology Today](#)

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