Sternberg’s Triangular Theory of Love

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Sternberg’s triangular theory of love is built upon three major components, passion, intimacy, and commitment. When Sternberg refers to passion he means the physiological arousal or physical desire that people experience when attracted to one another – kissing, hugging etc... Intimacy is viewed as an emotional connection – a meeting of the minds. Feeling as if you can share all of your thoughts, desires, goals, and experiences with another person. Commitment is the willingness to stay with another person through thick and thin.

Sternberg believed that the ideal love relationship was composed of all three elements, passion, intimacy, and commitment. He called that ideal love a consummate love. He described it as the ultimate, all-consuming love. He cautioned that maintaining a consummate love relationship may be harder than achieving it. Sternberg found it important that all three components are conveyed to a partner because “without expression, even the greatest loves can die.”

The presence or absence of the triangle components create different types of relationship dynamics. As the pieces of the triangle decrease, the strength of the relationship tends to lessen. Sternberg labeled the different types of relationships in regards to which triangle elements are exhibited.

Sternberg identified three types of love that portray two parts of the triangle but are missing one element. These loves are: conjugal love, romantic love, and fatuous love.

If the relationship were to have intimacy and commitment but lacking in passion, Sternberg labeled the relationship a conjugal love. Sometimes you will also see this type of relationship called a companionate love or married love. An example of a conjugal love may be an elderly couple who has been married many years. They have a deep respect, friendship, and commitment towards one another but they may not be hopping in bed and kissing all over each other anymore. This is also the same type of love that John Lee labels a storge love when describing different love styles.

When a relationship has the elements of passion and intimacy but lacks in commitment, Sternberg labeled it a romantic love. People who experience love at first sight may be categorized as romantic lovers. They are physically attracted and have an emotional connection but are not concerned about maintaining the relationship. This could include summer romances where two people hit it off at a vacation resort but in the end know that they are going to part ways. Think of the movie Grease where Sandy & Danny fell in love over the summer and had to part ways not realizing that they were going to end up at the same high school together.

The last type of relationship that involves two elements of the triangle is a fatuous love. Fatuous is the root word of infatuation, meaning silly or foolish. A fatuous love entails passion and commitment but does not have intimacy. This is a very shallow type of relationship. Basically, the partners are physically attracted to one another and want to be with each other forever and ever, but when they sit down with one another, don’t really have anything to talk about. Basically, they want to be with one another.
always because they think the other one is hot and wants to kiss them all the time, but the reality may be that they don’t have a lot in common. Some of the most important aspects of having a lasting relationship is having similar beliefs and attitudes, fatuous lovers may be blinded by the physical attraction and may not recognize, or ignore, the absence of intimacy.

The strength of a relationship becomes weaker when only one aspect of the triangle is present and two of the elements are missing. Three types of relationships occur which each entail only one piece of the triangle: empty love, infatuation, and liking.

Empty love consists of commitment without passion or intimacy. This type of relationship may have been a consummate love at one point, but the passion and intimacy faded over time. A couple where the wife lives upstairs and the husband lives in the basement apartment would be an empty love. They live completely separate lives and engage in minimal interaction, but never go through the process of getting divorced. Another example would be a couple who stay together for the children but who have lost interest in one another. Many people would argue that some couples in politics stay together to push their political agendas but have no interest in their personal relationship with one another.

From another angle, arranged marriages begin as an empty love. The spouses know very little about each other but have a commitment and ideally intimacy and passion will grow in the relationship as spouses get more familiar with one another. Arranged marriages have a very low divorce rate, but we cannot fail to acknowledge cultural pressures to stay together when comparing arranged marriage to love marriages.

Infatuation occurs when passion is present but there is no intimacy or commitment. Two flirting people who just met each other may experience infatuation. Remember, infatuation involves emotional feelings based on little exposure to the love object. People can experience infatuation with someone that they have not even met. Who is your celebrity crush? Many teenie boppers with Bieber fever experience infatuation. When infatuated, a person may become consumed by thoughts of the person they are infatuated with and become physically aroused by those thoughts. However, infatuation can disappear rather suddenly.

The last type of relationship that is defined by having one piece of the triangle is liking. Liking is when intimacy is present without passion or commitment. Remember, intimacy is a connection of the minds, a feeling that you can trust and disclose to someone. Liking would describe a friendship, you have a connection and are able to relate and appreciate one another but passion and commitment are just not in the mix.

Lastly, Sternberg describes not having any components of the triangle as nonlove. No passion. No intimacy. No commitment. An example would be passing people in the mall or glancing at someone sitting across the room at a meeting.

Relationships can shift, evolve, deteriorate, and change over time. A consummate love consisting of passion, intimacy, and commitment may change into a conjugal love where only intimacy and commitment are present or even move to an empty love with only commitment over time. Whereas
infatuation which only consists of passion may turn into a romantic love involving passion and intimacy. Sternberg’s triangular theory of love is a great tool to analyze your own relationships and contemplate what type of relationship is ideal for you.

“Without expression, even the greatest loves can die.” ~Sternberg