

Forming a Romantic Relationship: What Component Stands Out?

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## **Abstract**

The present study explored what is the most important component in beginning a romantic relationship based on Robert J. Sternberg's Triangular Theory of Love. This study expected to find that individuals ages 18 and older would report intimacy as the most valuable in forming a romantic relationship with another, since intimacy is often misinterpreted as sex. Sternberg postulated that three basic components of love exist (intimacy, passion, and commitment). 200 respondents were surveyed and asked the question "What do people who are in the beginning of a romantic relationship want most?" The majority of the respondents were attending college (61.5%), where  $M_{age} = 26.14$ ,  $SD_{age} = 10.97$ , and currently in a relationship of longer than six months (53%). The results showed that, of the three choices, intimacy was chosen most (60.5%). Congruent with the hypothesis, intimacy is the most important component in beginning a romantic relationship based on Sternberg's theory.

## **Introduction**

When thinking about a relationship with another individual, there are many initial characteristics, qualities, and reasons that come to mind. Any range of them can influence why a relationship exists. Although so many ideas flood the mind when talking about relationships, could not all the reasons that influence a relationship's beginning originate from one or few sources? Some of the most common thoughts about relationship beginnings stem from emotion, physical attraction, or action. Thus, a central theme must persist which ties these constructs together. A core set or singular focus could influence the relationship process. The variables which exist in the beginning stages of a relationship can be categorized according to present theories on love.

## **Literature Review**

Throughout life, individuals are searching for the answer as to why he/she wants to be in a relationship; partners consider what the reason is for being in their current relationship; and so the search for what influences males and females to begin and maintain a romantic relationship is thriving. Sternberg (1986) postulated that three major components contribute to a successful relationship: intimacy, passion, and commitment (p. 119). These components function as a base to lead to further qualities of a relationship developing. What seems to be more interesting than the actual components themselves is which component has the highest value. Individuals may attempt to involve all three components equally in the beginning stages of a relationship, but, as a generalization, this "perfect" scenario seems too good to be true.

### *Definition of Terms*

According to Sternberg (1986), intimacy is the bond which holds a relationship together, passion is the drive that leads to the experiences within a relationship, and commitment is the desire to maintain a relationship (p. 119). A study conducted by Ferreira, Narciso, and Novo (2012) redefined the term "intimacy"; their definition of the word relates more to self-disclosure and affection, rather than closeness. Although intimacy is still considered a valuable component of a relationship, the redefining of the term becomes inconsistent with Sternberg's theory and may muddle the interpretation of any results acquired using the Triangular Theory of Love in relation to other studies.

### *Variables*

While each component is a contributing factor to a successful romantic relationship, one component can outweigh the other two in contribution and value. To begin with, many variables can affect why one person would select intimacy over passion and commitment, passion over commitment and intimacy, or any combination of the three. Variables such as relationship status, gender, experience with relationships, and so on can affect such views. Madey and Rodgers (2009) state that "length of relationship did correlate with greater commitment" (p. 79). A previous relationship can influence the level to which individuals view intimacy, commitment, and passion. Further research shows that past relationships do carry weight in the decision on subsequent relationships (Lewandowski & Sahner, 2005). Personality can also add a desire to be more intimate, passionate, or committed. Ahmetoglu, Swami, and Chamorro-Premuzic (2010) discovered the Big Five personality types correlated positively with intimacy, passion, and commitment; specifically, passion, intimacy, and commitment correlated with agreeableness and intimacy and commitment correlated with conscientiousness (p. 1181). Furthermore, studies have been

conducted to infuse experience with personality when determining the level of magnitude of the three components (Auhagen & Hinde, 1997).

With the plethora of variables surrounding relationships, determining if one of the three components is truly valuable will require more than one study. The one variable which will contribute to the validity of this study is the fact that two individuals looking to be in a relationship or that are already in a relationship need interaction (Auhagen & Hinde, 1997, p. 67). When two individuals interact there must be some underlying reason for why they are interacting. Intimacy, passion, and commitment are three suitable candidates for this reason.

### *Components of Love*

Previous research relating to Sternberg's theory shows that intimacy and commitment dominate the relationship scene, but intimacy is the most noted of the three components in any research. Even with multiple definitions for intimacy, and possibly commitment and passion as well, intimacy and commitment can be reliable indicators for why a romantic relationship occurs, but are not necessarily correlated with the beginnings of a romantic relationship (Dussault, Hojjat, & Boone, 2013). While appearing in the context of romantic relationships, such research does not state the components are directly influential at the beginning of a romantic relationship. According to Kelly, Zimmer-Gembeck, and Boislard (2012), intimacy is one of three driving factors for romantic relationship formation. A validation of a Triangular Love Scale, in relation to Sternberg's theory, showed that commitment and passion varies among individuals, but intimacy is a fairly stable component in a romantic relationship (Overbeek, Ha, Scholte, de Kemp, & Engels, 2007). Another study, which leans towards the idea that commitment influences romantic relationships, stated that commitment is related to romantic love and inclines individuals to seek out worthwhile relationships (Gonzaga, Turner, Keltner, Campos, & Altemus, 2006). Commitment is seen as a basis for other romantic relationship characteristics, such as emotions and actions (Ackerman, Griskevicius, & Li, 2011).

Also, Titus and Scrofani (2012) note that, overall, an accurate representation of romantic love in a relationship is the Triangular Theory of Love. From a more biological perspective, Fletcher, Simpson, Thomas, and Giles (1999) stated that intimacy and commitment are pertinent when selecting a mate; in other words, beginning a relationship with another individual becomes more worthwhile with these two components (p. 74). Passion is still present in the beginning of a relationship, albeit less than intimacy and commitment. The influence of passion on a relationship starting is possible, but, like intimacy and commitment, not necessarily the groundwork for a romantic relationship (Förster, Özelsel, & Epstude, 2010). On top of all the differing theories and postulates about what begins relationships, some research even suggests that Sternberg's theory and others are incorrect in capturing what a romantic relationship consists of (Lamy, 2011). Regardless of such differing views, a foundation exists in which a romantic relationship is based upon. Without a foundation, any relationship, whether romantic or otherwise, would fall to pieces.

The current study wants to determine which component of Sternberg's Triangular Love Theory is most valuable in relationships. In other words, does intimacy, passion, or commitment matter more when an individual, male or female, wants to be in a romantic relationship or is in a romantic relationship with another? The study expects to find that individuals ages 18 and older will report intimacy is the most valuable in forming a romantic relationship with another person.

## **Method of Research**

### *Methods*

In order to collect data, the study used a survey. The survey contained several questions related to intimacy, passion, and commitment. The questions were created by the researcher and other confederates. The survey used multiple choice questions and Likert scales of 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree) and 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree) to quantify the data. After the participants answered the questions, the survey was analyzed to collect both descriptive and inferential statistical data.

### *Instruments*

The instrument in this study was a survey, which contained 34 questions. The question from the survey which pertained to this study was number 22 that stated, "In your opinion, what do people who are in the beginning of a romantic relationship want the most?" The multiple choice answers for this question were:

1. To have a sense of closeness and intimacy with the partner
2. To feel a deep desire and have that desire satisfied sexually
3. To know that the partner is committed to the relationship

### *Procedure*

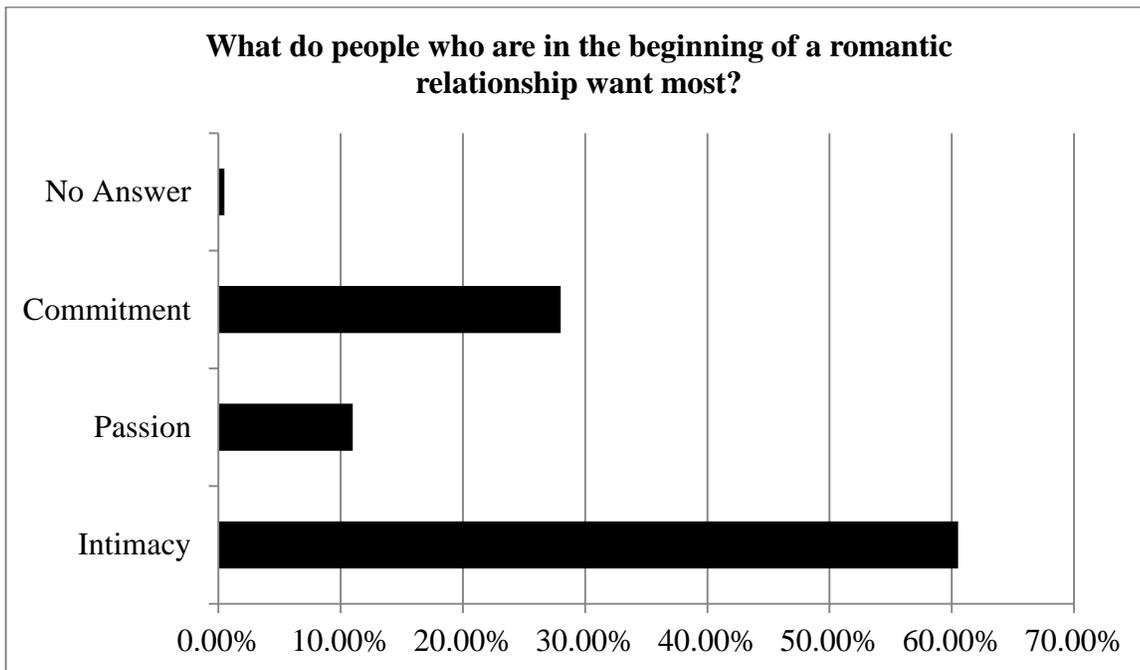
The survey was administered online through wix.com at the website <http://adai34.wix.com/hon320survey>. Participants were recruited by word of mouth and asked to volunteer to take the survey; if they took the survey, then, following completion of the survey, they submitted the completed survey for analyzing. The participants completed the survey at their own leisure, but were required to submit the survey by October 28, 2013.

## **Results**

The survey was conducted with 200 respondents consisting of 137 females (68.5%), 61 males (30.5%), 1 genderqueer/androgynous/non-binary (0.5%), and 1 did not answer (0.5%), where the ages ranged from 18 to 63 ( $M = 26.14$ ,  $SD = 10.97$ ). Respondents were freshmen (5.5%), sophomores (22%), juniors (12.5%), seniors (12.5%), college graduates (23.5%), attending graduate school (9%), had never attended college (3.5%), and had completed some college (7%). The relationship statuses were: "Currently in a relationship of 6 months or more in duration" (53%), "Currently in a relationship of less than 6 months in duration but hoping it lasts longer" (10.5%), "Currently in a relationship of less than 6 months in duration but not interested in it lasting any longer" (0.5%), "Not currently in a relationship but interested in seeking one" (23%), "Not currently in relationship and not seeking/interested in one" (12%), and did not answer (1%).

The data showed that intimacy is the most integral component for individuals in the beginning of a romantic relationship. This finding supports the hypothesis that of the three components (intimacy, passion, and commitment) postulated by Sternberg in his Triangular Theory of Love, intimacy is the most important. Out of the 200 participants surveyed, 121, or 60.5%, responded that intimacy was the most important factor; 56, or 28%, responded that commitment was the most important factor; 22, or 11%, responded that passion was the most important factor; and 1, or 0.5%, did not respond on the issue (see Table 1).

**Table 1**



## **Discussion**

### *Hypothesis*

The data from this study supported the hypothesis that intimacy is the most important component of beginning a romantic relationship. Overwhelmingly, 60.5% of the respondents chose intimacy. These results supported previous research, where intimacy was one of the most widely sought after components of a romantic relationship (Dussault, Hojjat, & Boone, 2013; Fletcher et al., 1999; Kelly, Zimmer-Gembeck, & Boislard, 2012; Overbeek et al., 2007). Intimacy seems to be a very popular trait when couples and individuals think about relationships. Since various definitions exist for intimacy, sex being one of the more popular definitions, the trait is more notable than commitment and passion. Furthermore, the data represented the value of each component in romantic relationships. Studies showed commitment was the next most valuable component, as evidenced by 28% of the respondents' choices (Ackerman, Griskevicius, & Li, 2011; Fletcher et al., 1999; Gonzaga et al., 2006), and passion was the least valuable component, represented by 11% of the respondents' choices.

### *Limitations*

The study gave a fairly adequate test for the hypothesis, although the data could be stronger with a larger sample size. Similarly, the age range of the respondents fluctuated significantly. The hypothesis was too broad to confidently state whether intimacy is by and large the most valuable of the three components of Sternberg's Triangular Theory of Love. A more specific hypothetical question could be raised on how the components relate to age, gender, or even socioeconomic status. No ethical issues were raised, since the question did not drastically separate one respondent from the others. In other words, the question of "Which component is most important?" does not probe deeply into a respondent, reducing the respondents' feelings of discomfort and anxiety. One methodological flaw encountered was length of the survey. The question utilized in this study was

#22 and fell roughly in the middle of the survey. The length of the survey could have deterred the respondents from answering honestly, since attention span may have dropped by the last ten questions. Also, this question was mostly not relatable to the other questions on the survey. The fact that 68.5% of respondents were female may support the claim that females view intimacy as the most important component in beginning a romantic relationship. The data in this study could support an alternative theory as well. Attachment theory is relatable to the data found in this study, since the relationship statuses used in the demographics regard either being in a relationship or not being in one (Fletcher et al., 1999, p. 86). For the respondents who were in relationships, their answer may have been more intimately based because a bond had been developed. On the other hand, those respondents that were not in a relationship when taking the survey could have answered based on a lack of a bond existing with another individual.

The biggest limitation, though, is the difference between each respondent's definition of the terms intimacy, commitment, and passion, and, subsequently, what value these components mean to each respondent. While some individuals may hold the same definition for intimacy, commitment, and passion as Sternberg, others may agree with the Ferreira, Narciso, and Novo (2012) study; some individuals may have a completely different definition than either study; and many respondents could disagree with the components altogether (Lamy, 2011). Therefore, a meta-analysis may be necessary because of the variability in definitions and ideas of what influences romantic relationships.

### *Further Considerations*

These findings can be generalized to the population of the present generation and the previous generation because the ages range from 18 to 63. Thus, a link may exist between age and value of component. These findings could be applied to counseling, where a counselor may advise a couple to work on intimate relations before addressing another area of their relationship. On the other hand, as general knowledge, an individual could use intimacy to one's advantage in the dating scene. Being more intimate on a first date or when trying to win a girl/guy over could lead to a relationship with him/her or set the groundwork for a relationship.

Because relationships are evolving constantly and quickly, this area of research should look at how intimacy is assimilated into one's own relationships. Many studies merely look at the basics and foundations of relationships and only chip the surface of interactions between couples. For example, one can incorporate traits and qualities into one's life in practical applications, such as committing oneself to hold a date (commitment), telling a partner "I love you" (intimacy), and actively seeking to spend time with a partner (passion). Looking at the incorporation of these traits and qualities into a relationship, and their effectiveness, will benefit individuals and couples more than simply stating one trait is better to have than another.

## **Lust, Love and Attachment**

### *Connections*

In class, discussions revolved around comparing how individuals view lust, love, and attachment. One such discussion showed lust, love, and attachment equated to passion, intimacy, and commitment, respectively. Several articles touched on the equivalence of these components in society. Society seems to lean towards passion (or lust) being a staple in relationships today. Previous research has explored this concept and found such correlations do exist where sex is a relevant starter of relationships (Kelly, Zimmer-Gembeck, & Boislard, 2012). Furthermore, Yovell (2008) explored how the BBURP system (Bilateral Bipolar Universal Response Potentiating

System) influenced sexual response and is responsible for releasing neurotransmitters which affect anterior, interior, and limbic areas (p. 120). These chemicals assist in translating lust physiologically and influences behaviors associated with lust such as sex. Intimacy, while defined in multiple fashions, arose in nearly every article explored during class. The concept of intimacy, according to Sternberg (1986), is the bond which holds a relationship together (p. 119). From the research in this study, along with research discussed in class, intimacy seems to represent the key to any relationship. Intimacy is referenced by Berscheid as the factor which unites couples, friends, and family; even though she follows another definition of intimacy which states intimacy is of mutual self- disclosure rather than a bond (p. 13). Lastly, commitment, or attachment, was referenced in several evolutionary and biologically based articles. Namely, Fisher's (2000) arguments refer to evolutionary theory; she makes a comment about hunter-gatherer civilizations utilizing lust and attachment as foundations for survival. Since resources were hard to come by, hunter-gatherers needed to "marry" or unite; these basic needs soon evolved into higher processes, such as love, where relationships became more complex in order to accommodate the expansion of resource gathering (economic wealth, social standing, etc.).

### *Practical Advice*

The research in this study utilized Sternberg's Triangular Theory of Love, ideas of relationship starters and builders, and how society influences lust, love, and attachment. Sternberg's theory uses intimacy, commitment, and passion in a geometric, pictorial manner to direct relationship counseling (p. 128-130). As each triangle morphs from equilateral to isosceles to scalene, the components of intimacy, passion, and commitment describe how relationships include lust, love, and attachment. An equilateral triangle is a complete balance of the three components, which suggests a relationship is as healthy as possible; on the other hand, the isosceles and scalene triangles mean that one component outweighs the other two or one component is lacking, which suggests that the single component is overbearing/lacking or the other two components possess little to no existence. Therefore, an unbalanced triangle requires a counselor to assess and provide options for how a couple can improve on the lacking components.

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