Social Psychology: Third Edition by Eliot R. Smith and Diane M. Mackie

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Chapter 11: Liking and loving

Case Study: The triangular theory of love

When Febr and Russell (1991) asked students to list all kinds of love that came to mind, they arrived at 216 different answers. Different types of love can be classified in various ways.

Robert Sternberg (1986) proposed one of the most popular classifications: the triangular theory of love. According to Sternberg there are eight different subtypes of love, which can be derived from three components. The first is intimacy; which involves liking, feelings of closeness, connectedness, and bondedness. Passion is the second component, which encompasses the drives that lead to romance, physical attraction, and sexual consummation. Finally, commitment reflects the decision, in the short term, that one loves another, and, in the long term, the decision to maintain that love.

The amount of love that is experienced depends on the strength of the components that are involved, while the kind of love that is experienced depends on what components are involved. When none of these components is involved, there is no love. Kinds of love that are experienced when only one component is involved are liking, infatuation, and empty love. When intimacy is involved without feelings of passion and commitment, liking is experienced. Infatuation is the love that is experienced when only passion is felt. Empty love is felt when commitment is the only component that is present.

Interactions between components also produce different kinds of love. The love that one experiences when intimacy and passion are the components that are present in a relationship, is romantic love. Companionate love is felt when couples are intimate and have commitment to the relationship. When there is no intimacy, but passion and commitment are felt, the type of love that is experienced is called fatuous love. Finally when all components, intimacy, passion, and commitment, are present, the kind of love that is felt is consummate love.

Wojciech (2002) proposed that these components are dynamic in the development of a relationship. He proposed that the cycle of love consists of six stages, which are based on the components of Sternberg's triangular model.

According to Wojciech, we first fall in love. The only component involved here is passion. Then there is the romantic beginning of a relationship, in which passion and intimacy are felt. These romantic feelings turn into complete love when couples commit (so passion, intimacy, and commitment are involved). After being together for a while, the passion disappears and the love experienced then is companionate love. When a relationship goes wrong and levels of intimacy drop, empty love is felt (the only component left is commitment). The final stage is dissolution, the relationship ends; there is no commitment any more.

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