Searching for love

Robert J. Sternberg on the stages of his quest to understand what bonds us together

Love perhaps best can be seen as a sort of a prism – looking at it in different ways reveals different faces of the same phenomenon. For example, one face of the prism might specify components of love, such as intimacy, passion and commitment; another face might specify the stories of love that give rise to such components, such as stories of fantasy, mystery, theatre, or even horror; yet another face of the prism might show the role of cognitive processes, such as intelligence, creativity and wisdom, in the formation and maintenance of successful loving relationships. This article examines some of the faces of the prism, which I observed in a series of stages over the course of a research career.

question

Why, if love is ever-present in people's lives, has it been studied so little by psychologists?

resources

Sternberg, R.J. & Weis, K. (Eds.) (2006). *The new psychology of love*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
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My whole life I have been searching for love. At a personal level, after a number of false starts, I have found it. In my research – initiated when a love relationship in my personal life was failing – I have tried to come closer to understanding what love is, how it develops, and why it succeeds or fails.

What, then, is love, how does it develop, and why does it succeed or fail? I have gone through five stages in seeking to understand love and what leads to success in love.

Stage 1: A structural model of 'bonds'

I started off my career studying intelligence. At a point in my life when I was in a failing relationship, I became interested in love. Indeed, I have always studied things at which I failed – I got interested in intelligence when I flunked IQ tests as a young child. My first attempt at a theory of love (Sternberg & Grajek, 1984) was to compare three structural models, based on structural (psychometric) theories of intelligence. A 'Spearmanian'

model would propose that love is one essentially indivisible construct (general factor) that cannot be further analysed; a 'Thomsonian' model would propose that love produces a general factor, but that the general factor can be understood as a large number of 'bonds', or emotions, motivations, and cognitions that are empirically separable but that typically occur together when one experiences love. A 'Thurstonian' model would propose that love comprises a small set (perhaps seven or eight) correlated aspects, or factors, that constitute the primary experience of loving.

The research supported the Thomsonian model, with underlying 'bonds' of love. They comprised constructs such as trust, caring, mutual respect, affection, and the like.

In the empirical work testing the models, I had relied primarily on the Rubin Liking and Loving Scales (Rubin, 1970). But I began to feel – based largely on feedback from colleagues – that the scale was too narrow in what it assessed, in particular shortchanging the passionate feelings of love. So I moved on in my thinking.

Stage 2: A triangular theory

Based on my own personal experiences in love, I next proposed a triangular theory

Type of Love	Intimacy	Passion	Commitment
Nonlove	No	No	No
Friendship	Yes	No	No
Infatuated Love	No	Yes	No
Empty Love	No	No	Yes
Romantic Love	Yes	Yes	No
Companionate Love	Yes	No	Yes
Fatuous Love	No	Yes	Yes
Consummate Love	Yes	Yes	Yes

Table 1: Taxonomy of kinds of triangles of love

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of love (Sternberg, 1986, 1997a, 1998a), which holds that love can be understood in terms of three components that together can be viewed as forming the vertices of a triangle. The triangle is used as a metaphor, rather than as a strict geometric model. These three components are *intimacy* (top vertex of the triangle), *passion* (left-hand vertex of the triangle), and *decision/commitment* (right-hand vertex of the triangle).

Intimacy refers to feelings of closeness, connectedness, and bondedness in loving relationships (Sternberg & Grajek, 1984). Passion refers to the drives that lead to physical attraction and excitement.

Decision/commitment refers, in the short-term, to the decision that one loves a certain other, and in the long-term, to one's commitment to maintain that love. More of each component leads to different sizes of love triangles, and different balances of the three components give rise to different shapes of triangles.

The three components of love are interactive. For example, greater intimacy may lead to greater passion or commitment, just as greater commitment may lead to greater intimacy or, with lesser likelihood, greater passion. Although all three components are important parts of loving relationships, their importance may differ from one relationship to another, or over time within a given relationship.

The three components of love generate eight possible kinds of love when considered in combination (Sternberg, 1998a). No relationship is likely to be a pure case of any of them. Table 1 summarises the various kinds of love.

A Triangular Love Scale, based on the theory, measures the three components (Sternberg, 1997a, 1998a). There were 12 Likert-scale items measuring each of the three components. An example of an intimacy item would be 'I have a warm and comfortable relationship with X.' An example of a passion item would be 'I cannot imagine another person making me as happy as Y does.' An example of a commitment item would be 'I view my relationship with Z as permanent.'

Factor analyses revealed three factors for the ratings, corresponding to the three components of the triangular theory. Although the scale shows moderate to high correlations with Rubin (1970) scale scores, in our work, the three subscales of the Sternberg Triangular Love Scale correlated more highly with relationship-satisfaction ratings than did either of the Rubin Liking or Loving Scales.

Stage 3: Love as a story

The triangular theory characterises the structure of love, but not how that structure emerged in the first place. According to the theory of love as a story (Sternberg, 1998b), love triangles emanate from stories. Almost all of us are exposed to large numbers of diverse stories that convey different conceptions of how love can be understood. Some of these stories may be explicitly intended as love stories; others may have love stories embedded in the context of larger stories. Either way, we are provided with varied opportunities – through experience, literature, media, and so forth – to observe multiple conceptions of what love can be. As a result of our exposure to such stories, we form over time our own stories of what love is or should be.

The interaction of our personal attributes with the environment – the latter of which we in part create – leads to the development of stories about love that we then seek to fulfil, to the extent possible, in our lives (Sternberg, 1995, 1996, 1998b; Sternberg et al., 2001). Various potential partners fit these stories to greater or lesser degrees. We are more likely to succeed in close relationships with people whose stories more rather than less closely match our own.

Taxonomy of some love stories	
Addiction	Strong anxious attachment; clinging behaviour; anxiety at thought of losing partner
Art	Love of partner for physical attractiveness; importance to person of partner's always looking good
Business	Relationships as business propositions; money is power
Collection	Partner viewed as 'fitting in' to some overall scheme; partner viewed in a detached way
Cookbook	Doing things a certain way (recipe) results in relationship being more likely to work out
Fantasy	To be saved by a knight in shining armour, or marry a princess and live happily ever after
Game	Love as a game or sport
History	Events of relationship form an indelible record; lots of records, mental or physical
Horror	Relationships become interesting when you terrorise or are terrorised by your partner
Mystery	Love is a mystery and you shouldn't let too much of yourself be known
Police	You've got to keep close tabs on your partner to make sure he/she toes the line
Science	Love can be understood, analysed, and dissected, just like any other natural phenomenon
Sewing	Love is whatever you make it
Theatre	Love is scripted, with predictable acts, scenes and lines
War	Love is a series of battles in a devastating but continuing war

Table 2: A selection of people's notions of love

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Some of the stories we have found to be particularly useful in conceptualising people's notions of love are shown in Table 2 (a more comprehensive list appears in Sternberg 1998b). This non-exhaustive working list of stories is based upon an analysis of love stories in literature, previous psychological research by myself and others, and on interpretations of informally gathered case material.

Love stories have within them complementary roles, which may or may not be symmetrical. We look for someone who shares our story or who at least has a compatible story that more or less can fit with ours, but we may not always look for someone who is just like ourselves. Rather, we may look for someone who is like us in sharing a story or similar story, but who is complementary to us in the role within that story. Thus, people look for others who are, at one level, similar, but at another level, different. From this point of view, neither similarity theory (Byrne, 1971) nor complementarity theory (Kerckhoff & Davis, 1962) is quite right with respect to love. Rather, which we seek depends on the level we are addressing.

We may have multiple stories represented hierarchically, so that the stories are likely to vary in salience for us. In other words, we will prefer some stories over others, so that we may find partners differentially satisfying as a function of the extent to which they match our more rather than less salient stories. A Likert-type scale presenting items representing multiple stories allows participants to show preferences for multiple stories.

In order empirically to test some predictions of the theory of love as a story, we devised a Likert scale-based questionnaire that assesses people's stories (Sternberg et al., 2001). We opted for such a questionnaire rather than for qualitative narratives because a scale more readily provides quantitative tests of the theory. All subjects were adults.

All participants received a love-stories scale. Some examples of items are:
l   Addiction: 'If my partner were to leave

me, my life would be completely empty.'
l   Art: 'Physical attractiveness is quite honestly the most essential characteristic that I look for in a partner.'
l   Business: 'I believe close relationships are partnerships, just like most business relationships.'
l   Fantasy: 'I think people owe it to themselves to wait for the partner they have always dreamed about.'
l   Game: 'I view my relationships as games; the uncertainty of winning or losing is part of the excitement of the game.'

Stories differed widely in popularity. The most popular stories were travel ('Love is a journey'), gardening ('Relationships need to be continually nurtured'), democratic government ('Two partners equally share power'), and history ('Events of relationship form an indelible record'), in that order. Least popular stories were horror ('Relationships become interesting when you terrorise or are terrorised by your partner'), collectors (Partner viewed as 'fitting in' to some overall scheme), autocratic government (One partner dominates or even controls other), and game (Love as sport), again in that order. There were significant sex differences favouring men for art, pornography ('Love is to degrade or be degraded'), sacrifice ('To love is to give of oneself or for someone to give of him or herself to you'), and science fiction (Feeling that one's partner is…strange). There was a significant difference in favour of women for travel – love is a journey.

We found that whereas all three components of the triangular theory of love (Sternberg, 1986) – intimacy, passion, and commitment – positively predicted satisfaction, those stories that showed significant correlations with satisfaction all negatively predicted the satisfaction ratings. It appears, therefore, that maladaptive stories in themselves can lead to dissatisfaction, but that adaptive stories do not necessarily lead to satisfaction.

Couples with more similar stories (as well as triangular profiles of love) experienced greater satisfaction in close relationships. In particular, there was a strong correlation (.65) between story profiles of men and women involved in

close relationships. Moreover the degree of discrepancy in couples' profiles of stories was also negatively correlated with ratings of satisfaction (–.45), as predicted by the theory.

Stage 4: Compatible styles

Although the triangular theory and theory of love as a story captured diverse elements of love, they did not fully predict which couples would succeed and

which would fail. At one point in my career, I was studying what I called 'thinking styles', or preferred ways of using one's abilities and knowledge base. For example, someone with a legislative style likes to come up with his or her own ideas; someone with an executive style prefers to execute other people's ideas; and someone with a judicial style prefers to evaluate ideas, usually of other people (Sternberg, 1997b).

I discovered that relationships could rise or fall depending on how well people were able to be compatible across their stylistic preferences. For example, legislative partners could do well because

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their relationship was exciting and constantly producing novelty, but could do less well if each insisted on having his or her way (as legislative people sometimes tend to do). Partners with executive styles might do well if they were content to 'follow the Joneses', but could do less well if one or the other wanted direction from inside rather than outside the relationship. Two partners with judicial styles could do well if they enjoyed analysing the behaviour of other couples and evaluating

what the others were doing wrong, but could do less well if they starting turning their judicial style on each other. One partner with a legislative style and one with an executive style could do well if one was happy to lead and the other to follow, but less well if the leader began to feel bored or the follower to feel imposed upon. And so forth. So at this point, I was arguing that compatibility in styles as well as love triangles and stories was important.

Stage 5: The role of WICS
More recently, I have suggested that success in love involves, beyond

triangular components, stories and styles, also wisdom, intelligence and creativity, synthesised (Sternberg, 2003, 2011, 2012). Creativity is needed because relationships and the circumstances in which they unfold change over time. Couples who cannot be flexible in adapting to those circumstances, and to the changes that inevitably happen because the trajectories of the various components of love are different over time (Sternberg, 1986), are more likely to be in failing relationships. Analytical intelligence is needed because relationships inevitably encounter challenges, and those individuals and couples that are not smart enough to overcome the challenges are more likely to succumb to them, watching their relationship fail along the way. Practical intelligence is important because the challenges of life require not only abstract analysis, but also common sense. And wisdom is needed to understand one's partner's viewpoint (dialogical thinking), to understand that what counts as a good answer to a problem can change over time (dialectical thinking), and to act ethically toward one's partner. Without WICS, one can have love, but nevertheless fail in one's relationship.
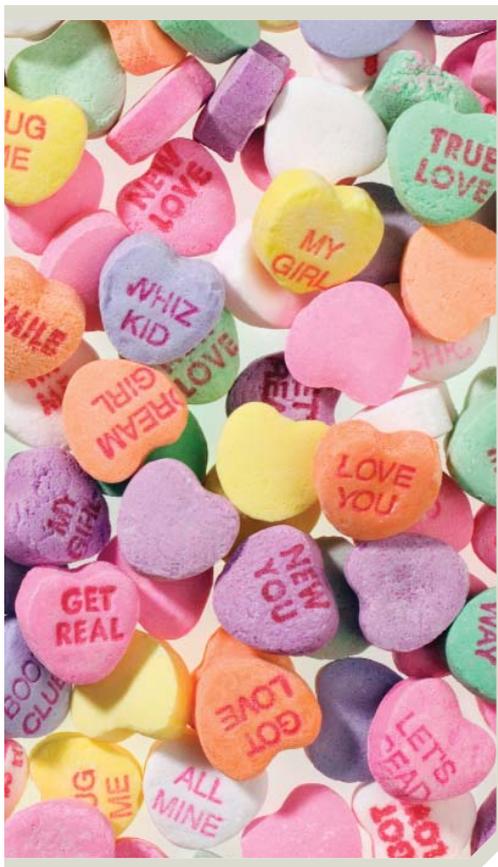
Conclusion
My thinking about what leads to success in loving relationships has evolved over time. In a sense, it started with my work on intelligence, and most recently, has returned, albeit in a very different way, to my work on intelligence. Obviously, there are many other factors underlying successful intimate relationships (see, for example, Gottman, 2000), and there are many other theories of love (see Sternberg & Weis, 2006, and box opposite). But I believe that, if a couple wishes to make a loving relationship work, it helps greatly if (a) they have compatible triangles of love, (b) compatible stories of love, (c) compatible styles of thinking, and (d) a synthesis of wisdom, intelligence, and creativity that they apply to their relationship.

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Measuring love

So you love Jack... or Jill. But *how much* do you love your him... or her?

Over the years, there have been a number of attempts to go beyond just studying love to actually measuring it. The measures provide a means for studying love in a scientific way – beyond just talking about it. But the measures also show how important it is to understand the theory underlying the measurement, because they illustrate how it is possible to have different 'love scales' that in fact measure different things because they are based on different underlying theories of love. My goal here will be to describe some of the theoretical orientations underlying such scales (beyond those discussed in the main article – see also Sternberg, 1998a, 1998b). A much more comprehensive account of scales used to measure passionate love, in particular, can be found in Hatfield et al. (2012).

The earliest major scale was that of Rubin (1970), who devised scales of both liking and loving. He found that the scales measured different aspects of one's experience in interpersonal relationships. His scale has been widely used in research.

A second theory that provided a scale for measuring love is that of Hendrick and Hendrick (1986), who based their scale on the 'colors of love' theory proposed by Lee (1973). The types of love measured in this scale are eros, or romantic love; ludus, or game-playing love; storge, or solemn love; agape, or selfless love; mania, or intense, jealous and uncontrolled passionate love; and pragma, or pragmatic love.

Hazan and Shaver (1987) suggested using attachment theory as a basis for developing their scale of styles of love. They initially proposed three styles of loving based on attachment theory: secure, ambivalent-insecure, and avoidant-insecure.

Fehr and Russell (1991) developed a prototype-based scale for measuring love. The idea was to assess those aspects of love that are closer to and further away from some central node or 'heart' of the concept.

Hatfield and Sprecher (2010) presented a scale for measuring passionate love. This work was followed by that of Sprecher and Metts (2012), who were interested in beliefs about romantic love. These researchers created a scale that measured four different sets of beliefs regarding romantic love, in particular: Love Finds a Way, One and Only, Idealization, and Love at First Sight. They found that men tended to be more romantic in their orientation than women, and that femininity was a better predictor of romanticism than was masculinity.