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Love Unveiled: Teenage Love Within the Context of Sternberg's Triangular Theory of Love

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ABSTRACT *Can adolescents fall in love? Robert Sternberg's triangular theory considers three relevant aspects of a consummate loving relationship: intimacy, passion, and commitment. Adolescents seem to fulfill some forms of intimacy, easily maintain passion, and lack adult commitment. Due to their inconsistencies in fulfilling Sternberg's viewed loving components, this paper suggests that adolescents are not capable of being consummately in love.*

In the sweet but tragic story of Romeo and Juliet, two teenagers kill themselves in an attempt to be with their true love. This story is timidly echoed in modern times when adolescents defy their parents and run away in order to stay with the one they love. Is it even possible for adolescents to truly be in love? Could Romeo and Juliet have shared true love, or were their feelings merely an expression of their adolescent emotions?

Using the construct of Robert Sternberg's modern empirical analysis—the Triangular Theory of Love—this paper will analyze whether or not an adolescent can truly declare themselves to be “in love” (Sternberg, 1986). Sternberg's theory has been validated through multiple studies and is considered a successful measuring stick in quantifying and qualifying love (Chandler, B. 1995; Lemieux et al., 1999; Lemieux et al. 2000; Sternberg, 1997). The Triangular Theory has also been validated as a useful scale in measuring adolescent love, finding a positive correlation between componential (intimacy, passion, and commitment) stability and establishing relationship satisfaction and duration (Overbeek, 2007). Although Overbeek's study seems to confirm the ability of adolescents to love, it only shows that fulfilling the Triangular Theory of Love's three components is correlated with relational satisfaction. This fulfillment may not happen in the majority of adolescents. This paper, rather than studying outcomes of component fulfillment, will consider adolescent ability (or inability rather) to fulfill the needs of the Triangular Theory.

The Triangular Theory Within the Context of Adolescent Love

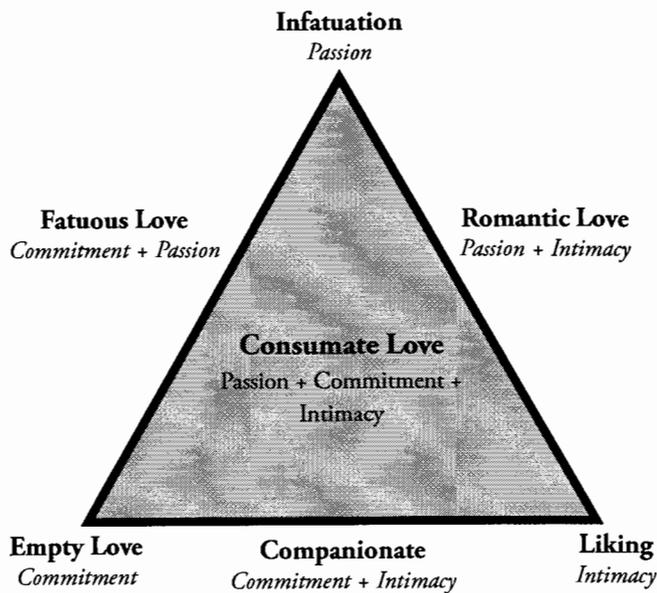
Rather than viewing love as a pure emotion that constantly changes, Sternberg develops his Triangular Theory believing love develops and stabilizes throughout one's relationship. This stabilization occurs with the fulfillment of three components: intimacy, passion, and commitment. He uses the three vertices of a triangle as placement for these components. Consummate love is Sternberg's term for an equal combination of commitment, intimacy and passion. It forms the “kind of love toward which many of us strive, especially in romantic relationships” (Sternberg, 1986, p. 124). According to this theory, a person, in this case an adolescent, can only experience a true love if his or her relationship maintains balance of intimacy, passion, and commitment. With unequal balance or missing components, an adolescent does not fulfill the components for consummate love, rather he or she meets the needs for a different type of love relationship. Sternberg breaks down those types of relations into ones of liking, infatuation, emptiness, romance, companionship, and infatuation (Figure 1). In order to determine an adolescent's capacity for consummate love, this paper will consider an adolescent's ability to fulfill the three components of love.

Adolescent Intimacy

The intimacy component of love involves feeling close to another person and enjoying that bond. Sternberg views it as “deriving from emotional investment” (Sternberg, 1986, p. 119) and finds it to be important in all loving relationships, whether romantic or not. There are two main areas of intimacy, one being the literal closeness the partners share with each other and the other being

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Figure 1. Diagram of the Triangular Theory of Love.



each partner's individual identity security (Shulman, et al. 1997).

In looking at closeness with another person, it seems clear that adolescents are capable of developing closeness mainly through disclosure. It has been found that girls tend to disclose more than boys in same sex relations (Camerana et al., 1990). In opposite sex relations, however, there is an equality of disclosure between girls and boys (Reisman, 1990). This disclosure in opposite sex relations suggests that boys may feel more capable of developing intimacy in male/female relations. With this capability in place, an intimate closeness can be formed within the context of an adolescent relationship.

In considering individuality in intimacy, adolescence is the time in which adolescents are defining themselves (Erikson, 1980). Only when an adolescent finds security in their identity can they have a mature intimacy (Duvall, 1964) that allows for relational stability. If a person can only define themselves within the context of a relationship and is not able to recognize their individual nature, they are less likely to form a relationship that is intimate and secure. Adolescents who don't recognize their identity and have lower aspirations will tend to fall in love more easily as well as seek marriage as a means to escape unsatisfying circumstances (Duvall, 1964).

Although adolescents may be capable of disclosing intimacies with a person of the opposite sex, they may still be struggling to develop their individual identities. Intimacy also has been found to increase in both genders

during the transition between early and late adolescence (Buhrmester, 1990). This age-related aspect of intimacy further implies adolescents are developing their ability towards true intimacy. It can then be argued that those identity seekers and intimacy developers will struggle with intimacy in relationships—thus lessening their ability to be in consummate love.

Adolescent Passion

The passionate aspect of love is defined as arousal driven by sexual and romantic desires but is not fully sexually driven. It is a love based on overpowering emotions that create a need for immediate gratification. The two areas of passion that should be considered in adolescents' ability to love are adolescent romantic partnerships and neurological developments because of societal influences on romantic partnerships and developmental aspects of adolescent growth.

During adolescence there seems to be a desire to have romantic partners, most likely driven by peer and societal influences (Rivadeneira & Lebo, 2008) as well as passionate desires. Intimacy regarding emotional closeness is often found in peer relationships, but a romantic relationship has the added emotional experience of passion. One study found that more than half of young adults (college students) consider their closest relationship to be with a romantic partner (Berscheid, Snyder, & Omoto, 1989). This suggests that intimacy with a friend may not be as fulfilling as an intimate relationship that includes elements of passionate closeness.

Studies in adolescent neurological development have found that the emotional limbic system is further developed than the rational prefrontal cortex. In emotionally driven situations, the limbic system controls adolescent behavior (Casey et al., 2007). Adolescents tend to base their decisions on behaviors that will provide them with positive immediate rewards rather than basing their choices on long-range outcomes (Galvan et al., 2006). The control that the limbic system has during the time of adolescence may allow passion, with its emotionality and immediacy complex, to take over and present a façade of love.

Adolescents are clearly capable of passion. Due to their desires to be in relationships with passionate closeness

and their use of the emotional and immediacy part of the brain, it can be assumed that they are capable of fulfilling the passionate component of consummate love.

Adolescent Commitment

The commitment aspect of love is the cognitive ability to decide to care for someone based upon logical reasoning and dedication. Although the degree of commitment in love can vary across different relationships, it is a necessary component in order for long-term love to survive because commitments validates a relationship as something with future plans.

Adolescents are capable of making commitments as seen in situations outside of romantic relationships. One study looked at adolescents in group treatment for marijuana use (Engle, 2007). Individual adolescent commitment was negatively correlated with future marijuana use. This shows that if an adolescent makes a commitment to stop using marijuana, they are likely to fulfill that commitment. Social influences also impact adolescent commitment by influencing adolescents in the choices they make. In this same study, group commitment (the support of negative or positive group member remarks) influenced the future marijuana use of group members (Engle, 2007). Although this study does not show commitment in adolescent romantic love, it does show their commitment ability and societal influences upon commitment. To further this discussion of adolescent commitment, psychosocial influences and adolescent neurological development will be explored.

Cognitive abilities of children and adolescents are substantially different from adults (Keating, 1990). Some researchers would argue that full reasoning abilities are developed by mid-adolescence (Fischhoff, 1992). When considering the influence of psychosocial influences, this 'development' becomes less clear (Steinberg & Cauffman, 1996). The more social influences affect adolescents, the less efficient they are at making decisions regardless of the maturity of their cognitive processes (Steinberg & Scott, 2003). If there is pressure based upon a peer group to be in a relationship, this may create a quasi-commitment that is not stable. This commitment, would be based upon social approval rather than a long term desire to be with another person. Although that is a commitment it

isn't commitment based on personal desire and may not be long term in nature.

Another important factor to consider concerning adolescent commitment is that of the prefrontal cortex, or the area of the brain devoted to decision making. This area of the brain is not fully developed in adolescents and as previously discussed, may lead them to overuse their limbic (emotional) system (Casey et al. 2007; Yurgelun-Todd, 2007). The prefrontal area that is developing is not only helpful in reasoning, it is also an area implicated in long term planning (Spear, 2000). If adolescents have a lowered ability to make long term plans, their commitment towards a relationship may be of a fleeting nature.

It thus seems logical to argue that adolescents are not as capable of having a committed relationship as adults who have more stability in their mature state. Due to an adolescent's heavy reliance on social influences and underdeveloped prefrontal cortex, their commitment to a relationship is highly questionable.

Consummate Love Ability

Given the above discussion, are adolescents able to experience consummate love? According to Sternberg's triangle of love theory and the conclusions drawn in this paper, adolescents can have full development of the passion component but less development of intimacy and commitment components. One could argue that an adolescent who has developed an identity is capable of experiencing intimacy. One could also argue that an adolescent with a well developed prefrontal area who is not highly influenced by psychosocial factors is capable of experiencing commitment. Taking both of those and the ability of adolescents to experience passion, it can be possible for an adolescent to experience consummate love.

Although it is possible for an adolescent to experience consummate love, this ability is unlikely. Intimacy requires an adolescent to be close with another person and to have a fully developed identity. Although adolescents may become close to one another through self-disclosure, they are still developing their identities, and thus are still learning how to be intimate. Passion calls for adolescent romantic desires and immediate gratification. The majority of adolescents desire romantic relations, and due to neurological limbic control, they make decisions based on

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positive immediate rewards. Adolescents can clearly experience passion. Commitment necessitates an adolescent's personal relational dedication and long term decision making. Adolescents are less efficient at making personal decisions due to social influences, they may enter a relationship for approval rather than personal desire to be with another person. They are also less adept at making long term decisions due to their underdeveloped neurological system.

It should also be noted that persons of other cultures as well as persons from previous eras may have had a different experience of consummate love. The Triangular Theory was developed as an indicator of consummate love ability for persons in the current time period, specifically studying persons in the Western world. The author acknowledges that considerable differences are found in other cultures and eras which renders this theory limited in its scope.

Given the population of interest (adolescents of the Western world), the evidence shows that the majority of adolescents, due to their inability to have true intimacy and commitment in their relationships, cannot experience the fullness of love as defined by Robert Sternberg's Triangular Theory. The love that these adolescents may be misconstruing as true love is, according to Sternberg, 'infatuation.' This type of love relationship is based solely on the component of passion, with the absence of intimacy and commitment. Those experiencing infatuation experience psychophysiological arousal like hormonal secretions and increased heartbeat (Sternberg, 1986, p. 124). Given the evidence of adolescents' neurological emotionality, it could be argued that adolescents may experience this higher degree of psychophysiological arousal found in infatuation and may be in a state of infatuation rather than love.

Conclusion: Romeo and Juliet

Romeo and Juliet may be the ideal representatives of adolescent passion. With their need for immediacy and dramatization of love they experience pure passion and would rather die than live without each other (Schwaber, 2006, p. 299). According to Sternberg's Theory what our culturally enshrined star crossed lovers and the majority of adolescents feel is a passionate bliss, rather than an in-

timate, committed, and consummate love that can last a lifetime. Adolescence is a time of constant flux and continual development. Without intimacies created through formed identities and passion offset with commitment, consummate love with regards to Sternberg's conceptualization, is not possible. This paper, using Sternberg's theory as a basis for evidence, suggests that adolescents may love someone, but they can't truly be in consummate love.

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