

DESCRIBING THE NEOCLASSICAL PSYCHE EMBEDDED IN STERNBERG'S TRIANGULAR THEORY OF LOVE

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Sternberg's Triangular Theory of Love was examined to identify the structure of the psyche implied in that theory. Sternberg's theory posits three components of human functioning to explain the phenomenon of love in close relationships: intimacy, passion, and commitment. Analysis of these three components indicates that they align with a neoclassical model of the human psyche. A neoclassical psyche consists of at least three fundamental, irreducible capacities: cognition, affect, and conation. Sternberg's commitment component relies on the capacity for cognition (and conation), the passion component is derived from conation (and affect), and the intimacy component is derived from emotional investment or the capacity for affect (and cognition). Therefore, Sternberg's overall Triangular Theory of Love ontologically presupposes a neoclassical structure to the psyche.

The purpose of this paper is to describe the structure of the human psyche that is implied in Sternberg's Triangular Theory of Love, with its three nodes of intimacy, passion, and commitment. Therefore the authors of this paper aimed to answer the question, "What must be the structure of the psyche in order for love to consist of intimacy, passion and commitment?"

The central hypothesis in this paper is that the structure of the psyche, implied in Sternberg's work, is "a neoclassical psyche," a psyche that consists of at least these three fundamental, irreducible, capacities: a) cognition, b) affect, and c) conation (Hilgard, 1980; LeDoux, 2002; Tallon, 1997).

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A SUMMARY OF STERNBERG'S TRIANGULAR THEORY OF LOVE

The triangular theory of love is so called because it holds that love can be understood in terms of three components that together can be viewed as forming the vertices of a triangle: intimacy, passion, and decision/commitment (Sternberg, 1986). Sternberg grounds this theory historically and rationally (1988, 1998; Beall & Sternberg, 1995) as well as psychometrically and empirically (Acker & Davis, 1992; Chojnacki & Walsh, 1990; Lemieux & Hale, 1999; Sternberg, 1997; Sternberg & Grajek, 1984; Whitley, 1993).

According to Sternberg (1986, 1988, 1997) the intimacy component refers to a sense of bonding and close, connected feelings in loving relationships. Thus this component focuses on the emotions that comprise the experience of warmth in a loving relationship. Sternberg and Grajek's (1984) cluster analysis of various love scales indicated that intimacy included such factors as desire to promote the beloved's welfare, sharing with the beloved, mutual understanding, high regard and intimate communication. "In general, the intimacy component might be viewed as largely, but not exclusively, deriving from emotional investment in the relationship..." (Sternberg, 1986, p. 119).

The triangular theory's passion component refers to "the drives that lead to romance, physical attraction, sexual consummation, and the like in a loving relationship" (Sternberg, 1988, p. 118). Sternberg focuses on sexual desire as central to this component, but he also acknowledges that a variety of needs, ranging from self-actualization to self-esteem to dominance/submission are likely to influence passion. In particular, Sternberg considers that the passion component is largely – but not exclusively – derived "from motivational involvement in the relationship" (1986, p. 119).

The decision/commitment component is structured temporally and consists of two facets, one in the present and one in the future (Sternberg, 1986, 1988, 1997). In present time (the short term) the issue is the decision to love someone or not. In regard to future time (the long term) the issue is to maintain commitment to the beloved. Sternberg (1986), at least in his early work on this theory, considered that the decision/commitment component was cognitive in nature, stating that this "component thus includes within its purview the cognitive elements that are involved" (p. 119) in making a decision to be in, and to stay in, a loving relationship.

Based on these three components of love, eight possible types of love come into focus, creating a classification system for the various kinds of love relationships (Sternberg, 1986, 1988). A "liking" type of love is intimacy without passion or commitment; "infatuation" is passion without intimacy or commitment; "empty love" is commitment without passion or intimacy; "romantic love" is a combination of intimacy and passion sans commitment; "companionate love" results from intimacy combined with commitment but

without passion; “fatuous (stupid) love” is the combination of passion and commitment but lacking intimacy; “consummate love” comes from all three components being active in the relationship; and “nonlove” is when all three components are absent.

A NEOCLASSICAL PSYCHE

The psyche that underlies Sternberg's model is aptly referred to as a *neoclassical psyche*, as it is reminiscent of the psyche as described by Socrates in Plato's *The Republic* (380BCE/1937), Book IV. Socrates explained that the psyche consists of three “parts”: the logical-rational (logiston), the spirited or affective (thymia), and the desiring (epithymia). This description of the psyche is also neoclassical in relation to the psychology of the medieval period, among both Christian and Islamic scholars. Thomas Aquinas, the Scholastics (Tallon, 1997), ibn Síná (Avicenna), and ibn ‘Arabí (Leahey, 2000), all wrote extensively on the capacities of the psyche or mind to know (cognition), to love (and other emotions) and to will (conation). Those medieval Christian and Islamic scholars, however, did not specifically consider the structure of the psyche to be based on the three capacities of cognition, affect and conation; yet, Immanuel Kant – often considered the greatest modern philosopher – did. He wrote in his *Critique of Judgment*, “There are three absolutely irreducible faculties of the mind, namely, knowledge, feeling, and desire” (cited in Hilgard, 1980, p. 109). And despite behaviorism's reign throughout much of the 20th century – in which the concept of the psyche, and particularly the “will” were banished – and despite the current emphasis in the discipline of psychology upon “cognition,” many psychologists have continued to frame the structure of the psyche in terms of these three capacities. Particularly in social psychological research, regarding the concept of “attitude,” psychologists posit this triadic psyche (Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975; Kothandapani, 1971; Ostrom, 1969), as well as in general reviews of the history of psychology and studies of the mind (Hilgard, 1980; Insko & Schopler, 1967; Plooij, 2003), or in educational psychology (Diessner, 2001; Snow, Corno & Jackson, 1996). Likewise, in the study of religion/spirituality and psychology this triadic psyche surfaces, ranging from studies by Christian psychologists (Kristensen, Pedersen, & Williams, 2001; Pedersen, Williams, & Kristensen, 2000; Tallon, 1997) to that of Bahá'í psychologists (Danesh, 1997; Mustakova-Possardt, 2003). Even in the explicitly “hard science” of biological psychology, the neoclassical psyche is posited. LeDoux (2002), in his *Synaptic self*, states that “Traditionally . . . the mind has been viewed as a trilogy, consisting of cognition, affect (emotion), and conation (motivation)” (p. 24; NB, LeDoux is emphasizing the willful and volitional aspect of motivation).

Thus, a neoclassical psyche has its roots in the works of Plato; the elements of it are discussed throughout the writings of medieval Christian and Islamic psy-

chologically oriented philosophers; it is affirmed by Immanuel Kant's enlightenment philosophy; and continues to be a force in contemporary psychology.

THE NEOCLASSICAL PSYCHE IMPLICIT IN STERNBERG'S MODEL

As mentioned above, a neoclassical psyche is an integration of the three quasi-discrete fundamental psychological capacities of cognition (knowing), affect (emoting) and conation (volition, will). In the next three subsections we briefly explicate the hypotheses that Sternberg's description of intimacy is primarily undergirded by the capacity to emote; that his definition of passion is primarily a motivational experience and thus based on the conative ability; and that decision/commitment, in Sternberg's model, is at least partially derived from the capacity for cognition.

Of course, the three fundamental human capacities of cognition, affect and conation are only "quasi-discrete." That is, they are qualitatively different capacities, but nonetheless in human phenomenology they are always in interaction with each other, and it seems unlikely that any human experience is one of pure cognition with no affect, or that we have a pure conative experience with no immediate influence from affect or cognition (Danesh, 1997; LeDoux, 2002; Mustakova-Possardt, 2003; Tallon, 1997). For example, Bandura (1986) captures this discrete-but-interactive notion with his concept of "reciprocal determinism." And just as Socrates' model of the psyche implies *logiston*, *thymia* and *epithymia* as inherently interactive (Plato, 1937), and Freud's model of the psyche is explicit about ego, id, and superego being dynamically interactive, Sternberg also emphasizes that the "important thing to remember is that the triangles are not independent but interactive" (1988, p. 136; cf. Acker & Davis, 1992; Lemieux & Hale, 2000).

Intimacy and Affect Sternberg's definition of intimacy emphasizes feelings, the ". . . close, connected, and bonded feelings in loving relationships" (1986, p. 120). Clearly, this component of love relies on the psyche's capacity for affect.

In terms of interaction, intimacy also is dependent on the interaction of the psyche's capacities for cognition and affect, in at least two ways. Firstly, the emotional sharing and mutual understanding that characterizes intimacy requires cognition of the beloved's emotions, and understanding of the other is also dependent on cognition of the beloved's thoughts and behaviors. That is, the understanding of the other that intimacy requires, is dependent on interpersonal cognition, or what Gardner (1999) would call "interpersonal intelligence." Secondly, cognition is intimately bound to affect in the sense that cognitions tend to precede emotions, and some psychologists of emotion actually consider cognition as partially constitutive of emotion itself (Arnold, 1960; Lazarus, 1991).

Passion and Conation To the degree that human conation, or the human will, is defined as desire (cf. Plato's *epithymia*, 1937) and as motivation (Lazarus, 1991; LeDoux, 2002; Snow & Jackson, 1994) then Sternberg's passion component is an expression of the psyche's fundamental capacity for conation. Sternberg has emphasized that the passion component is derived "largely, but not exclusively, from motivational" processes (1986, p. 119; and see also 1997), and psychologists tend either to identify conation with motivation, or at least to consider motivation as one aspect of conation (Lazarus; LeDoux; Snow & Jackson).

Of course passion is passionately integrated with affect and cognition. The everyday woman – or man-on-the-street – associates passion with affect, with very strong feelings. We tend to think of a passion as happening to us and being reflected in our affective state (see Averill, 1980). And there appears to be no passion without an object of passion; and cognition is necessary for us to behold that object of passion in our consciousness.

Decision/Commitment and Cognition (and Conation) In Sternberg's early work (1986) on his triangular love theory he associated cognition with decision/commitment in love: The "decision/commitment component" is derived "largely, although not exclusively, from cognitive decision in and commitment to the relationship" (p. 119). In his later work (e.g., 1997) on the theory, he does not explicitly mention cognition in regard to this component, nor affect nor conation.

Granted, cognitions are likely to precede decisions and commitment, and are intimately and inextricably bound to them, just as many cognitive psychologists consider that cognitions either precede emotional experience, or are partially constitutive of emotional experience. However, decisions and commitments seem more likely to be derived from the psyche's capacity for conation. That is, decisions and commitments are choices, they are acts of the will, they are volitional. This position is strongly supported by humanistic psychology (Maslow, 1954; Rogers, 1961), that is, self-actualization primarily occurs through acts of the will, through decisions and commitments that are acts of conation. This view that our choices, decisions and commitments are acts of the will is also emphasized in the emerging positive psychology (Seligman, 2002, see pp. 135-6).

Therefore, it seems that the decision/commitment component of Sternberg's theory is primarily an expression of the psyche's capacity for conation, although integrated with – and influenced by – human cognition.

SUMMARY AND DISCUSSION

We conclude that the central hypothesis in this paper, that the structure of the psyche implied in Sternberg's work is a neoclassical psyche, has been plausibly

supported in the above analysis. We have demonstrated that the three components of the triangular theory of love are indeed substantially constituted by the capacities of cognition, affect, and conation; and we reviewed the work of psychologists and philosophers who advocate that the human mind or psyche is constituted by those three capacities.

Seeking Disconfirmation What would disconfirm the findings of this analysis? Our hypothesis would be partially disconfirmed if it were shown that intimacy or passion or decision/commitment, as described by Sternberg, were expressions of the human psyche that cannot be accounted for by cognition, affect and/or conation. This is an open question, and we invite criticism in this regard.

The methodology of our analysis would be called into question if we misinterpreted the views of Socrates, Hilgard (1980), LeDoux (2002), and others that the psyche is constituted by the three fundamental capacities of cognition, affect, and conation. The meaningfulness of our hypothesis, in regard to the notion of a neoclassical psyche would be in question if there were other capacities of the human psyche that are fundamental to cognition or affect or conation, or if there were other fundamental capacities that are parallel to cognition, affect and conation. We invite discussion in this regard.

Of course, postmodernists and deconstructionists would shudder at our use of the phrase “structure of the psyche,” and point out this is a Western-centric and arbitrary view of the capacities of the human being. Postmodernists have been delightfully helpful in reminding writers of their various privileged positions, of combating racism and sexism, and of keeping our minds open. But we might be tempted to point out that when they shudder, they are experiencing *affect*; and that the shuddering was caused by their *cognition* of our use of the concepts of “structure” and “psyche;” and that their decision to criticize was an act of *conation*.

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