

## **The Effect of Attachment and Sternberg's Triangular Theory of Love on Relationship Satisfaction**

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**ABSTRACT** - We investigated the association between attachment and intimacy, passion, and commitment proposed in Sternberg's Triangular Theory of Love on relationship satisfaction. Fifty-five university undergraduates who were in romantic relationships completed the Relationship Scales Questionnaire (Griffin & Bartholomew, 1994) and Sternberg's Triangular Theory of Love Scale (Sternberg, 1988). Hierarchical regression analyses revealed that the association between secure attachment and relationship satisfaction is mediated by commitment and intimacy. However, when controlling for passion, secure attachment and passion each provided direct paths to relationship satisfaction. These findings are discussed in relation to the Triangular Theory of Love, and the function of attachment, caregiving, and sexual systems as these systems impact relationship satisfaction.

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When one is asked to list important components of a healthy romantic relationship, intimacy, passion, and commitment intuitively come to mind. These three variables are believed to be implicit in people's theories of love (Aron & Westbay, 1996; Sternberg, 1997) and ontologically pre-suppose a Neoclassical structure linking affect (intimacy), motivation (passion), and cognition (commitment) to a conceptual model of love called the Triangular Theory of Love (Diessner, Frost, & Smith, 2004; Sternberg, 1988, 1997, 2006). The Triangular Theory of Love posits that intimacy, passion, and commitment are necessary elements toward attaining consummate, or complete love. Intimacy is the feeling of closeness, connectedness, and bondedness that one feels in a relationship. Passion represents the drives that lead to romance, physical attraction and sexual activity. Commitment, in the short term, involves the decision that one loves another person. In the long term, commitment involves a decision to maintain that love (Sternberg, 1986, 1997, 2006).

Possibly less intuitive to the layperson but found to be equally important in relationship satisfaction are attachment styles. Attachment as predictive of quality romantic relationships evolved out of research on attachment in infancy (e.g., Ainsworth, Blehar, Waters, & Wall, 1978; Ainsworth, 1989; Bowlby, 1982). Three types of attachment in infancy--secure, anxious, avoidant--may have important implications for relationships later in life (Ainsworth, et al, 1978; Ainsworth, 1989). Hazan and Shaver (1987) extrapolating the work on infant-caregiver attachment to close relationships in

adulthood proposed that individual differences in attachment are the prototypes, schemas, or working models of social interaction that organize romantic relationships with others.

A body of research has found that attachment predicts successful and unsuccessful relationships. Secure attachment is associated with greater trust and commitment (Simpson, 1990), greater intimacy (Pielage, Luteijn, & Arrindell, 2005), greater self-confidence (Feeney & Noller, 1990), better communication skills (Guerrero, 1996), and greater willingness for self-disclosure (Shi, 2003). Anxious individuals engage in poorer coping techniques (Mikulincer, Florian, & Weller, 1993, Birnbaum, Orr, Mikulincer, & Florian, 1997). Anxious individuals perceive more conflict and escalation of conflict in their relationships on a daily basis (Campbell, Simpson, Boldry, & Kashy, 2005). Avoidant attachment is associated with being emotionally distant and distrusting the partner (Kirkpatrick & Hazan, 1994; Simpson, 1990) and being less satisfied with the relationship (Collins, Cooper, Albino, & Allard, 2002).

Attachment has been conceptualized in many ways-- along two dimensions: close-independent and secure-insecure (e.g., Siegert, Ward, & Hudson, 1995); a two-dimensional space: angry/resistant and proximity seeking/avoidant (Fraley & Spieker, 2003); three patterns: secure, anxious, and avoidant (Hazan & Shaver, 1987); with others proposing a four factor structure: secure, preoccupied, fearful-avoidant, and dismissively-avoidant based on two-dimensions consisting of positive or negative views about self and others (Bartholomew and Horowitz, 1991). Regardless of the number of dimensions or types of attachment used the findings consistently report the link between attachment and variables such as intimacy, commitment, communication, coping, and disclosure.

The purpose of this paper is to test whether attachment style directly predicts relationship satisfaction or is mediated by variables of love such as intimacy, passion and commitment which in turn predict satisfaction. We link attachment specifically to three structural components of love—intimacy, passion, and commitment-- initially proposed by Sternberg (1988) in his Triangular Theory of love. More recently Sternberg (2006) has subsumed the Triangular Theory of Love and Love as Story under his Duplex Theory of Love. Sternberg (1997) early on in the development of this theory recommended that the Triangular Theory of Love be connected to attachment constructs in order to better understand the complexities of love and relationships.

The attachment patterns we investigate are secure-insecure and close-independent (Siegert, et al, 1995). These attachment patterns are derived from the Relationship Scales Questionnaire (RSQ; Griffin & Bartholomew, 1994). Although secure, fearful, dismissing, and preoccupied attachment patterns are traditionally measured using the RSQ, use of these types of attachment have resulted in some mixed findings (e.g., Pielage, et al 2005). A subsequent factor analysis of the RSQ has revealed an underlying two-dimensional structure--secure-insecure and close-independent attachment--that may provide more predictive utility in understanding the association between attachment and relationship satisfaction (Siegert, et al 1995). Although these two dimensions were identified several years ago, we are not aware of attempts to link these two attachment dimensions to relationship variables such as satisfaction, intimacy, passion, and commitment. Expanding on the work of Siegert and colleagues (1995), we propose that secure attachment is associated with less anxiety in the relationship, greater intimacy, trust, and willingness to discuss and resolve issues with the partner. Insecure attachment

is associated with anxieties about whether the partner really loves or values them, worries about being abandoned, and not being accepted. We would predict that a secure attachment pattern is associated with more intimacy, passion, and commitment and with greater relationship satisfaction. Close attachment represents emotional closeness in the relationship and comfort with being near the partner. As one moves more to the independent end of the continuum, more detachment is associated with the relationship and is represented by feelings of not wanting to depend on others, reluctance to get close to others, and discomfort with being close to others. We would predict that close attachment is associated with more intimacy, passion, and commitment, and greater satisfaction in the relationship than is an independent attachment pattern.

Finally, it is important to test whether attachment directly predicts relationship satisfaction or is a precursor to variables of love such as intimacy, passion and commitment which in turn predict relationship satisfaction. A path analysis that tests the direct and indirect effects of attachment on relationship satisfaction using valid and reliable measures of love can further our understanding of attachment as a precursor to successful or unsuccessful relationships. Pielage and colleagues (2005) when investigating the variables that mediate attachment and psychological distress stated that “attachment influences functioning through the quality of one’s affectional bonds (p. 456).” In other words, a mediational model is proposed where attachment styles can predispose the individual to develop certain affective, cognitive, and motivational-behavioral responses which in turn affect relationship satisfaction. Positive attachment styles such as secure attachment can lead to more pro-relationship behaviors, greater ability to establish intimacy, passion, and commitment in a relationship which in turn result in greater satisfaction in the relationship. Dysfunctional attachment styles such as insecure attachment will have the opposite effect resulting in less ability to establish intimacy, passion, and commitment which result in less relationship satisfaction.

Based on our background research, we are not aware of studies that directly tested intimacy, passion, and commitment as defined by the Triangular Theory of Love and secure-insecure and close-independent attachment styles on relationship satisfaction as proposed by Siegert and colleagues (1995). In addition, studies that have tested intimacy, passion, and commitment as mediators of attachment have used only parts of the Triangular Theory of Love Scale (e.g., Collins et al, 2002; Kurdek, 2002) or have measured these variables in other ways and in other contexts (e.g., Pialege, et al, 2005).

## **Method**

### ***Participants***

Participants were 55 university undergraduates (15 males and 40 females). The mean age was 19.7 years ( $SD = 2.82$ ). The sample consisted of 91% Caucasian, 6% African American, and 2% Asian American students. To be eligible for the study, participants had to be in a romantic relationship at the time of recruitment. Most of the sample was unmarried at time of participation (unmarried = 94%, married = 6%). Participants received course credit for their participation.

### **Materials and Procedure**

*Attachment Style.* Attachment style was measured using the Relationship Scales Questionnaire (RSQ; Griffin & Bartholomew, 1994). A factor analysis by Siegert, Ward, and Hudson (1995) discovered that the RSQ can be identified along two dimensions: Secure-insecure and close-independent (see Siegert, et al, 1995 for the breakdown of RSQ items along these two dimensions). Correlations and multiple regression analyses will be conducted using this 2-factor structure. Participants indicated on a 1 (not like me) to 5 (very much like me) point scale the extent each item of the RSQ (e.g., “*I find it difficult to depend on other people*”) was characteristic of them.

*Intimacy, Passion, Commitment.* Intimacy, passion, and commitment were measured using Sternberg’s Triangular Love Scale (Sternberg, 1988). Participants used a 1 (not at all) to 9 (extremely) point scale to indicate the extent to which statements about intimacy (e.g., “*I have a warm relationship with \_\_\_\_\_*”), passion (e.g., “*I find myself thinking about \_\_\_\_\_ frequently during the day*”), and commitment (e.g., “*I am committed to maintaining my relationship with \_\_\_\_\_*”).

*Relationship Satisfaction Scale.* Based on past research on relationship satisfaction, we developed a relationship satisfaction scale (Table 1). Participants filled out ten questions related to satisfaction with their relationship on 1-5 points scales (e.g., “*How satisfied are you with this relationship?*” “*How likely do you think you will be in this relationship one year from now?*”). The relationship satisfaction items exhibited high internal reliability (*Cronbach’s alpha* = .82) and were averaged to form a composite satisfaction score.

## **Results**

### **Preliminary Analyses**

An analysis of the correlation of gender, length of relationship, and marital status of participant with attachment styles, intimacy, passion, commitment, and relationship satisfaction revealed no significant correlations between gender and marital status with any of the dependent measures. Length of relationship did correlate with greater commitment. The longer in a relationship; the greater the commitment ( $r = .30, p < .05$ ).

Pearson product moment correlations among secure-insecure attachment, intimacy, passion, commitment, and individual items of the relationship satisfaction scale (Table 1) indicated that significant correlations were observed for 5 of the relationship satisfaction items and the composite measure of relationship satisfaction (Table 2). Greater insecurity was associated with less intimacy, passion, and commitment in the relationship and with less satisfaction. The close-independent dimension correlated with intimacy, passion, and commitment in that greater independence was associated with less intimacy, passion, and commitment. With regard to relationship satisfaction, the close-independent dimension correlated only with the item measuring the degree of passion believed to be in the relationship (Item 5). A marginally significant correlation was observed between the close-independent dimension and the composite relationship satisfaction score. Although not approaching conventional levels of statistical significance the correlation was consistent with our prediction that greater independence is associated with less

satisfaction. Intimacy, passion, and commitment correlated with the relationship satisfaction items and with the composite satisfaction score.

**Table 1**  
*Correlations among Attachment Dimensions, Intimacy, Passion, Commitment, and Relationship Satisfaction Items*

	Attachment		Triangular Theory of Love		
	Secure-insecure	Close-Independent	Intimacy	Passion	Commitment
1. How satisfied are you with this relationship?	-.48**	-.11	.66**	.47**	.74**
2. How easy is it for you to talk to your partner about important issues?	-.43**	-.15	.53**	.41**	.53**
3. How easy is it for you to talk to your partner about everyday issues?	-.21	.03	.44**	.30*	.33**
4. How satisfied are you with the intimacy of your relationship?	-.22+	-.19	.47**	.30*	.33*
5. How much do you think you are in a passionate relationship?	-.18	-.30*	.58**	.47**	.44**
6. How much do you think you are in a committed relationship?	-.41**	-.22+	.69**	.53**	.80**
7. How much do you think your partner is committed to the relationship?	-.48**	-.26+	.67**	.60**	.83**
8. How likely do you think you will be in this relationship one year from now?	-.39**	-.20	.74**	.63**	.83**
9. How much do you rely on your partner for stability in this relationship?	-.23+	-.18	.46**	.30*	.38**
10. How easy was it for you to begin this relationship?	-.07	.11	.08	-.03	.38**

Note. + $p < .10$ , \* $p < .05$ , \*\* $p < .01$ .

**Table 2**  
*Correlations Among Intimacy, Passion, Commitment, Attachment Dimensions and Relationship Satisfaction Composite Score*

	Attachment		Triangular Theory of Love		
	Secure-insecure	Close-Independent	Intimacy	Passion	Commitment
Intimacy	-.45**	-.27*			
Passion	-.39**	-.34*	.83**		
Commitment	-.52**	-.33	.85**	.83**	
Relationship Satisfaction	-.48**	-.22+	.82**	.62**	.79**

Note. + $p < .10$ , \* $p < .05$ , \*\* $p < .01$ .

### **Mediational Analyses**

Conditions necessary for analyses of mediators are observed significant correlations between independent variables, presumed mediators, and dependent variable (Baron and Kenny, 1986). These conditions held for the secure-insecure dimension. Three

hierarchical regression analyses were conducted. In each regression the relationship satisfaction composite score was regressed on intimacy, passion, and commitment. These variables were entered into the first step of separate regression analyses. The secure-insecure dimension was entered into the second step of each regression analysis (Table 3). We were interested in testing whether the amount of variance explained by the relationship between secure-insecure attachment and relationship satisfaction would be significantly reduced after controlling for the three items in the Triangular Theory of Love. As predicted, secure-insecure attachment no longer predicted relationship satisfaction after controlling for intimacy and commitment indicating that these variables mediate the effect of secure-insecure attachment on relationship satisfaction. However, we found that secure attachment independently predicted relationship satisfaction after controlling for passion.

**Table 3**  
*Summary of Hierarchical Regression Analysis for Variables Predicting Relationship Satisfaction*

Variable	<i>B</i>	<i>SE B</i>	<i>Beta</i>	<i>T</i>	<i>R</i> <sup>2</sup> change
Step 1					
Intimacy	.42	.04	.82	10.32**	.67
Step 2					
Secure-insecure	-.12	.08	-.14	1.59	.02
Step 1					
Passion	.24	.04	.62	5.82**	.39
Step 2					
Secure-insecure	-.24	.10	-.27	2.46*	.06
Step 1					
Commitment	.30	.03	.79	9.48**	.63
Step 2					
Secure-insecure	-.08	.09	-.09	.88	.01

Note. \**p* < .05, \*\**p* < .01.

### Discussion

The results of this study extend previous work on attachment and relationship satisfaction by exploring the mediators through which attachment may lead to satisfactory or unsatisfactory relationships. We interject the Triangular Theory of Love with its three specific elements—intimacy, passion, and commitment—as the mediating variables between attachment style and relationship satisfaction. Direct tests of the interrelationship between attachment as defined by Siegert and colleagues (1995) and the Triangular Theory of Love on relationship satisfaction have heretofore not been conducted.

We found that the effects of secure-insecure attachment on relationship satisfaction are mediated by intimacy and commitment. A more secure attachment predicts intimacy and commitment, which in turn predict greater relationship satisfaction. Feelings of security allow one to establish intimacy in a relationship as has been demonstrated in past research. Security can also allow one to commit to a relationship without fear of rejection or abandonment. Our findings suggest that intimacy and commitment are the paths through which secure attachment can lead to relationship satisfaction. Interestingly,

security and passion each provided direct effects on relationship satisfaction when controlling for passion. Although speculative, we offer an explanation for this finding subject to future research. Sternberg (1988) for example, points out that intimacy and commitment may be relatively stable components whereas passion is “relatively unstable” and can “fluctuate unpredictably (p.49).” Passion may play a larger role in short term relationships and may be more dependent on psychophysiological arousal than intimacy and commitment. If passion is linked to arousal then the relationship between attachment and passion can be understood in the context of other systems that impact the relationship process. For example, Shaver and Mikulincer (2006) propose that “optimal functioning of the attachment, caregiving, and sexual systems enlarges the area of the ‘love triangle’ by increasing the intensity of its three components: intimacy, commitment, and passion (p.50).” These three systems increase feelings of connectedness and oneness with the partner. However, they postulate that attachment and caregiving systems strengthens the commitment component; whereas passion may be more related to the sexual-behavior system contributing to attraction, vitality and arousal within the relationship. More research is needed to definitively determine if the attachment process indirectly predicts relationship satisfaction through intimacy and commitment, whereas the pathway involving passion is linked more to the sexual-behavior system.

The study had several limitations. Although we found that the close-independent attachment dimension correlated with intimacy, passion, and commitment as predicted, its correlation with relationship satisfaction did not reach conventional levels of statistical significance. Our 10-item measure of satisfaction, although internally reliable, will also need to undergo more psychometric testing. Longitudinal studies are needed to determine if attachment is a necessary precursor to intimacy, passion, and commitment. Our findings provide a basis from which longitudinal studies can proceed.

### **Conclusion**

We investigated the association between attachment and variables in Sternberg’s Triangular Theory of Love found to be important in relationship satisfaction. Our hypotheses were generally supported. We found that two dimensions of attachment, secure-insecure and close-independent are linked to intimacy, passion, and commitment. The association between secure attachment and relationship satisfaction is mediated by intimacy and commitment.

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