

Love and attachment
three perspectives
psychology essay



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Love, as an emotion, seems to have multiple meanings depending on the context of its use. One meaning is a short-lived emotional state, such as a surge of passion or affection, but it is also used to denote a long-term experience in that state towards a particular person. In this sense it is possible to express or suppress feelings of love just as one can do the same with feelings of fear, joy, or sadness (Shaver & Hazan, 1988). The word 'love' in emotive language is used flexibly, meaning both fleeting feelings and those of a more permanent nature.

Love also involves attachment and affection for another, particularly relevant when it comes to parents and their offspring. Following the ideas of Harlow (1958, 1959), Bowlby, and Ainsworth (Ainsworth, 1978, 1985; Bretherton, 1992) attachment is linked closely to the concept and common usage of the word love. Bowlby's theory in particular implied an 'affectional bond' was involved in attachment (Shaver & Hazan, 1988). Harlow (1959) found that infant monkeys showed a marked decrease in ability to develop affectionate relationships if they were deprived of attachment from birth, socially and emotionally stunted as a result of a lack of love and attachment in the start of their lives.

There are many theories surrounding the concept of love and attachment in psychology, but some notable theories are Bowlby's previously mentioned establishing theory (Bretherton, 1992) and Harlow (1958) who meant that the attachment and love of early life was an instinctual thing, while Sternberg's triangular theory characterised by passion, intimacy, and commitment (Sternberg, 1986) saw it as emotional schemas that combined into different variants of love. The behaviourist view, as presented by

Gewirtz and Pelaez-Nogueras (1992), maintains that what we choose to call affectionate bonds and love are derived from conditioned behaviours, caused by the need to fulfil primary drives like the need to feed in infants.

Harlow's studies on rhesus monkeys shed some light on what may foster the attachment in newborns, exposing newborn monkeys to various experimental situations with surrogate mothers, covered in terrycloth or mesh and with or without a feeding nipple (Harlow, 1959). At the time, the commonly held belief was that the basic motives were primary drives – hunger, thirst, elimination, pain, and sex – and other motives, like love or affection, were from secondary drives, with the mother associated with the reduction of primary drives (Harlow, 1958). However, Harlow found this behavioural view on the attachment between mother and child an insufficient explanation.

The newborn monkeys were presented with two surrogate mothers, one wire mesh with a feeding nipple and one terry cloth without a feeding nipple, the monkeys preferred the softer terry cloth mother (Harlow, 1958). Throughout the experiment, the monkeys were found to spend more time on the cloth surrogate than the wire mesh one with food. From this data Harlow discovered that the comfort of contact was an important variable in the development of affection, while food was not as important (Harlow, 1958).

In later experiments, Harlow expanded on his previous findings, demonstrating that the monkeys would also turn to the cloth surrogate for security and comfort (Harlow, 1959). Using a similar experimental method as Ainsworth in her study of human children and their attachment to their

mothers (Ainsworth, 1985) he found that when placed in an unfamiliar room, the monkeys would explore the room, all the while using the surrogate mother as a 'home base' (Harlow, 1959). The removal of the surrogate in this situation prompted a similar reaction in the monkey as it did in some children in Ainsworth's study. With their 'home base' removed, the monkeys would scream, cry, rock, crouch and freeze up, showing clear anxiety and stress at the absence of their surrogate (Harlow, 1959).

Harlow's research, as well as that of Bowlby and Ainsworth (Ainsworth, 1985; Bretherton, 1992; Harlow, 1958, 1959) found evidence for the evolutionary theory of attachment, the idea that when children are born they are biologically 'pre-programmed' to form attachments with others as a result of their need for survival. An infant's ability to produce behaviours such as crying or smiling to attract the attention of their care giver is an adapted behaviour because of its survival advantage (Ainsworth, 1985).

In Sternberg's triangular theory of love, the three elements can be combined into eight forms of love that are defined by their social function (Sternberg, 1986). The intimacy component is comprised of feelings such as connectedness, closeness, and bondedness in a relationship. It can be largely viewed as being the emotional investment of a relationship. Passion as a component is a drive that refers to a love that is more romantic in nature, meaning physical attraction and sexual activity, dealing mainly in arousal states. Passion here is motivation to be involved. The decision/commitment component is in turn the decision to love someone else and to maintain that love in long-term relationships and stay committed. This

component deals with the cognitive elements and decision making within the potential of romance and love (Sternberg, 1986).

Sternberg (1986) adds that love, like many other psychological phenomena, can be divided into multiple components, but stipulates that the triangular simplification is needed in order to maintain the sight of the whole of the concept rather than getting lost in the details of it. He defines love as a complex entity that derives in part from instincts and drives, but also a large part of it is social learning from role models that are observed and then defined as love, the triangular theory an example of how the reaction of emotion (love) leads the conscious perception of it, which can cognise into the open acceptance and commitment to the subject of these emotions. Sternberg (1986) also maintains that not all three of these components he has defined need to be present for it to be considered love, leading to eight variations of love containing the three components to varying degrees.

For the sake of the theme of affection and attachment and the previous studies focus on caregiver attachment, consummate love is the element of the triangular theory of love that is directly related to love in the form of attachment. Sternberg (1986) described consummate love as including all three components – the intimacy of emotional involvement with children, the satisfaction and fulfilment of motivational needs, and the firm commitment of the decision/commitment component.

Sternberg's (1986) theory is very much focused on how the emotions of love affect the social interaction and cognition of the individuals involved, from both ends. How the individual perceives the other defines the manner in

which they fall into the triangular theory, which makes the three components interactive aspects of love rather than independent phenomena. Sternberg (1986) points out that each of the three components have their own courses, an internal coordination system for the concept of love and the related emotions derived from it. Following Frijda's model of emotion and emotional expression (Oatley, Keltner, & Jenkins, 2006), you can easily apply it to Sternberg's (1986) theory. The initial development of a potential relationship, platonic or romantic, is a series of emotional scripts, leading into affective learning – the accumulated wisdom – which allows you to respond with the appropriate emotion (Izard, 2009; Oatley et al., 2006).

Behaviourists maintain that behaviour is not innate, but learnt through methods such as associations between different stimuli with classical conditioning or operant conditioning where behaviour is altered by patterns of reinforcement and punishment and they have also suggested that we learn by observing. In this vein, the behavioural interpretations of love and affection maintains that it is reinforced by caregivers responses and observing them (Gewirtz & Pelaez-Nogueras, 1992). Gewirtz and Palaez-Nogueras (1992) says some of the research done on operant learning has been accomplished in unnatural contexts where typically the infant's response is immediately followed by the conditional stimulus. There's a marked focus on how behaviours begin and are maintained through delivery of stimuli in various situations using both food based reinforcers and social behaviours such as a mother holding her child (Dunst & Kassow, 2008; Gewirtz & Pelaez-Nogueras, 1992).

A difficulty in examining the spontaneous interactions between child and caregiver that Gewirtz and Pelaez-Nogueras (1992) observed was the type of behaviour and the type of response would change regularly, which is why behavioural studies often take place in unnatural contexts, for the sake of controlling the variables, often manipulating the behaviour of the mother to elicit responses from the child (Gewirtz & Pelaez-Nogueras, 1992; Pelaez-Nogueras et al., 1996). There has been less focus on how the caregivers behaviour may have influenced the child's behaviour, according to Gewirtz and Pelaez-Nogueras (1992), leading to the assumption of an underlying cause to the behaviour, contrary to behavioural theory. Gewirtz and Pelaez-Nogueras (1992) points out that the underlying cause has been most often been identified as affection, following the ideas put forth by Ainsworth (Ainsworth, 1978), Bowlby (Bowlby, 1951; Bretherton, 1992) and Harlow (1958). Gewirtz and Pelaez-Nogueras (1992) argue that rather than attachment, the behaviours children elicit when being left by their caretakers are behaviours reinforced by the caretakers responses (Gewirtz & Pelaez-Nogueras, 1987, as cited in Gewirtz & Pelaez-Nogueras, 1992). Concerning the "strange situation" by Ainsworth (1985) Gewirtz and Pelaez-Nogueras (1992) found the study did not take into account the behaviour of the caregiver and the stranger as discriminative stimuli.

The common idea of love is generally that it is not entirely an emotion that can be properly pinned down to one thing, as Sternberg (1986) points out that when undertaking the task it is in the interest of looking at the whole that one must summarise and simplify the concept. This belies the fact that emotions are actually complex phenomena, nuanced and ambivalent, but is

no less important in order to appropriately gain a generalised understanding of the concept. Harlow (1958) was fascinated by the fact that love, the word and the concepts derived from it, was so integrated into the human psyche, particularly in the field of arts, but no one had yet to properly look at it from a scientific point of view.

The cognitive form of attachment and the evolutionary form of attachment, while not entirely compatible, can coexist. The cognitive approaches the concept of emotion, and through that the concept of attachment and love, at the assumption that there is an 'I' already present, the conscious is already fully formed (Oatley et al., 2006). In contrast, evolutionary psychology takes the stance that the 'I', the consciousness, is the outcome of the evolutionary, developmental, adaptive, and reproductive process. Harlow (1958, 1959) found that the need for attachment, for affection and love, was something the monkeys in his study sought instinctively. Their development became stunted at the lack of attachment, the monkeys becoming socially inept, leading to difficulty in them forming social bonds later in life which faded more quickly than those of the monkeys who did have the opportunity to find safety and security in a surrogate (Harlow, 1959).

In contrast, the behavioural views presented by Gewirtz and Pelaez-Nogueras (1992) distance themselves from the idea of emotions.

Behaviourism does not consider the internal processes that cognitive theory favours nor does it take into account the instincts behind emotions such as attachment and love. In this, the views of behaviourism on attachment seem lacking, as the primary drives have been proven to not be the main determinant in attachment (Harlow, 1958, 1959).

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Out of the three main articles, Harlow (1958), Sternberg (1986), and Gewirtz and Pelaez-Nogueras (1992), Sternberg has the more comprehensive view. The behavioural ideas are too simplified, lacking in ways that the evolutionary and cognitive do not. Gewirtz and Pelaez-Nogueras (1992) do point out that the research in this particular area has often misrepresented operant conditioning to the detriment of the understanding of the behavioural perspective, but mentions that the progress behaviourists have achieved has led to a better understanding of what operant conditioning can influence and affect, perhaps to the advantage of counteracting the effects of neglect as shown by Harlow (1958, 1959).

In this sense, one can acknowledge that the behavioural methods are more helpful than informative. Where the evolutionary concept can tell us why attachment is formed, the instinctive need for closeness and touch that helps the infant further develop that Harlow saw in the infant monkeys (Harlow, 1958), and the cognitive aspect tells us how we process the emotions of attachment and love and how it can further develop into more broader concepts of love and attachment, as Sternberg theorised (Sternberg, 1986), behavioural theories do not look into these aspects. Instead they look at how it might be possible to enhance or suppress using their operant conditioning methods (Gewirtz & Pelaez-Nogueras, 1992) in order to foster safe attachments and healthy development.

The behavioural view, while potentially beneficial for therapeutic methods, does not sufficiently acknowledge the unconscious processes in action or the emotions behind it. Harlow certainly acknowledges the idea of emotion behind attachment by attributing attachment to the instinctive drive in <https://assignbuster.com/love-and-attachment-three-perspectives-psychology-essay/>

infants for closeness and, through that, protection, both psychologically and physiologically (Harlow, 1958), but focus more on how the monkey infants react to the different stimuli rather than the emotions that may be involved. Sternberg's triangular theory offers us a broad view, describing elements of emotion that combine and create what we may call love and affection (Sternberg, 1986) and out of the three perhaps the one that properly evaluates the emotion and function of emotion in a broader sense. The cognitive view starts with affect, which in this case is the desire to engage someone else, which then is organised into perception and cognition and the individual acting on the emotion (Izard, 2009; Oatley et al., 2006).

Sternberg's cognitive perspective allows him to explore emotions and the interaction both within and between individuals, considering what elements of attachment – intimacy, passion, and commitment – come together to become the emotion we refer to as 'love' (Sternberg, 1986), rather than focusing on the physical element of why we need attachment for a healthy development or how we can further foster this. It evaluates the emotion itself as one part of a collection of components, driving home how emotions are not simple, but complicated unconscious and conscious cause and effect systems in social interaction (Izard, 2009; Sternberg, 1986).