PART I

The Composition of Cupid’s Arrow: What Is Love?
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A Three-Component View of Love

Jason first fell in love in the first grade. The girl, whom I will call Irene, was a classmate of his and lived right up the block. She and Jason spent a lot of time together, playing the usual childhood games, like hide and seek, tag, and house, walking to school, and helping each other out in any way they could. Irene and Jason had a modest plan: to become king and queen of the world, and to have everyone else in the world as their subjects. There was also one other detail in their plan: They would wear clothes, but no one else would be allowed to wear them. No doubt, Freud would have had a field day with them.

Irene eventually moved away, and that was the end of both the friendship and the kingdom: Jason never saw her again. The love affair was neither passionate nor, it turned out, long-lasting. But Irene and Jason had at least one critical element of love: They were close friends and shared with each other intimacies they shared with no one else. They communicated well with each other and always felt comforted in each other’s presence. Although they may not have had all the components of love, they certainly had one of the most important: They cared about each other and supported each other. In short, they had an emotionally intimate relationship.

Jason next fell in love with Patti, who sat in front of him in a high school class. The very first day Jason laid eyes on her, he fell madly in love. He spent whole class periods just staring at her. He never screwed up the courage to tell her how he felt about her, however. His lack of communication was not for lack of feelings. He thought about Patti
almost constantly and, for a year of his life, about little else. He did his schoolwork on automatic pilot. When he would talk to other people, he would be, at most, half there, because he was secretly thinking about Patti. He would go home at the end of the day and pine away thinking about her.

The months went by, but Jason couldn’t move himself to express his feelings toward her; instead, he acted coldly toward her, because he was afraid of giving himself away (which he probably did anyway). He was crushed when he discovered that Patti had fallen in love with someone else. To make matters worse, the boy was a star athlete, and Jason wasn’t even on a team. It all looked so bleak.

Eventually, Jason got over his obsession with Patti, and they even became somewhat friendly, although Jason discovered that he liked her less than he had loved her. Even worse, the more he got to know her, the less he felt they had in common.

The feeling Jason had for Patti was a second ingredient of love: passion. Whereas the intimacy he felt toward Irene had been mutual, as intimacy almost has to be, the passion he felt for Patti was one-sided, as passion often is. Looking back, he would call his love for Patti an infatuation: It developed without his even knowing Patti and continued in the absence of any real mutual relationship between them. Infatuation is fueled more vigorously by doubts and uncertainties than by knowledge of what a person is like. Eventually, Patti went away to college, and Jason never saw her again. Nor did he feel any great need to see her.

The third time Jason fell in love was with Cindy, whom he met relatively soon after he met Patti. His relationship with Cindy was everything his relationship with Patti was not, and vice versa. In a word, the relationship with Cindy was “sensible.” They had relatively similar backgrounds and upbringings; they both did well in school and were career oriented; and, in a nutshell, they were what almost anyone would call a good match. Their relationship had neither the deep intimacy of the relationship with Irene nor the overwhelming passion of the one-sided relationship with Patti, but it did have something that the other two relationships had lacked. Cindy and Jason believed they loved each other, and so they committed themselves relatively quickly to each other.
A Three-Component View of Love

![Diagram of love triangle](image)

Figure 1.1. The triangle of love. The assignment of components to vertices is one of convenience; it is arbitrary.

Paramount in each of these relationships was one of three ingredients, or components, of love: intimacy (with Irene), passion (for Patti), and commitment (to Cindy). Love can be understood as a triangle (which should not be confused with a "love triangle" of three people), of which each point is one of these three components: intimacy (the top point of the triangle), passion (the left-hand point), and decision/commitment (the right-hand point) (see Figure 1.1).

THE TRIANGLE OF LOVE

A substantial body of evidence suggests that the components of intimacy, passion, and commitment play a key role in love over and above other attributes. Even before I collected the first bit of data to test my theory, I had several reasons for choosing these three components as the building blocks for it.

First, many of the other aspects of love prove, on close examination, to be either parts or manifestations of these three components. Communication, for example, is a building block of intimacy, as is caring or compassion. Were one to subdivide intimacy and passion and commitment into their own subparts, the theory would eventually contain so many elements as to become unwieldy. There is no one, solely correct
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fineness of division. But a division into three components works well in several ways, as I hope to show in this chapter and beyond.

Second, my review of the literature on couples in the United States, as well as in other lands, suggested that, whereas some elements of love are fairly time-bound or culture-specific, the three I propose are general across time and place. The three components are not equally weighted in all cultures, as we will see, but each component receives at least some weight in virtually any time or place.

Third, the three components do appear to be distinct, although, of course, they are related. You can have any one without either or both of the others. In contrast, other potential building blocks for a theory of love – for example, nurturance and caring – tend to be difficult to separate, logically as well as psychologically.

Fourth, as I will show later, many other accounts of love seem to boil down to something similar to my own account, or a subset of it. If we take away differences in language and tone, the spirit of many other theories converges with mine.

Finally, and perhaps most important, the theory accounts for feelings and behavior – as I hope to demonstrate throughout the book.

Intimacy

In the context of the triangular theory, intimacy refers to those feelings in a relationship that promote closeness, bondedness, and connectedness. My research with Susan Grajek indicates that intimacy includes at least ten elements.²

1. Desiring to promote the welfare of the loved one. The lover looks out for the partner and seeks to promote his or her welfare. One may promote the other's welfare at the expense of one's own – but in the expectation that the other will reciprocate when the time comes. You are experiencing this element when you want your partner to get the job she wants or when you want her to get over a painful disappointment in her life.

2. Experiencing happiness with the loved one. The lover enjoys being with his or her partner. When they do things together, they have a good time and build a store of memories upon which they can draw in hard times. Furthermore, good times shared will spill over into the re-
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relationship and make it better. You are experiencing this element when you are having a fantastic time with your partner on a skiing trip or at a concert.

3. **Holding the loved one in high regard.** The lover thinks highly of and respects his or her partner. Although the lover may recognize flaws in the partner, this recognition does not detract from the overall esteem in which the partner is held. You experience this element when you think your partner is the greatest, despite his failure to get a hoped-for promotion.

4. **Being able to count on the loved one in times of need.** The lover feels that the partner is there when needed. When the chips are down, the lover can call on the partner and expect that he or she will come through. You experience this feeling when the family finances are on the rocks, and your partner, who has not been working, wants to get a job immediately in order to improve them.

5. **Having mutual understanding with the loved one.** The lovers understand each other. They know each other’s strengths and weaknesses and how to respond to each other in a way that shows genuine empathy for the loved one’s emotional states. Each knows where the other is “coming from.” You experience such understanding when you both understand, perhaps without saying a word, why the couple who has just come over to dine for the first time won’t be returning – not if you can help it.

6. **Sharing oneself and one’s possessions with the loved one.** One is willing to give of oneself and one’s time, as well as one’s things, to the loved one. Although all things need not be joint property, the lovers share their property as the need arises. And, most important, they share themselves.

7. **Receiving emotional support from the loved one.** The lover feels bolstered and even renewed by the loved one, especially in times of need. You know you have this element when you feel like nothing is going right, and you then realize that one thing is – your partner is right there with you.

8. **Giving emotional support to the loved one.** The lover supports the loved one by empathizing with, and emotionally supporting, him or her in times of need. You know you are able to give this emotional support when you feel like your partner is acting unreasonably at
work, and you still support him, whether or not you agree with his actions.

9. **Communicating intimately with the loved one.** The lover can communicate deeply and honestly with the loved one, sharing innermost feelings. This is the kind of communication that you experience when you’re embarrassed by something you’ve done, and you still can tell your partner about it.

10. **Valuing the loved one.** The lover feels the great importance of the partner in the scheme of life. You know you have this kind of valuing when you realize that your partner is more important than the material possessions you have.

These are only some of the possible feelings one can experience through the intimacy of love; moreover, it is not necessary to experience all of these feelings in order to experience intimacy. On the contrary, our research indicates that you experience intimacy when you experience a sufficient number of these feelings, whatever the exact number may be. You do not usually experience the feelings independently, but often as one overall feeling.

What makes for intimacy? Different psychologists say similar things, albeit in different ways. Intimacy results from strong, frequent, and diverse interconnections between people. The intimate couple, then, is characterized by strong ties and frequent interactions of a variety of kinds. Qualities of friendship that are keys to intimacy include trust, honesty, respect, commitment, safety, support, generosity, loyalty, mutuality, constancy, understanding, and acceptance.

Intimacy probably starts in self-disclosure. To be intimate with someone, you need to break down the walls that separate one person from another. It is well known that self-disclosure begets self-disclosure: If you want to get to know what someone else is like, let him or her learn about you. But self-disclosure is often easier in same-sex friendships than in loving relationships, probably because people see themselves as having more to lose by self-disclosure in loving relationships. And odd as it may sound, spouses may be less symmetrical in self-disclosure than are strangers, again probably because the costs of self-disclosure can be so high in romantic love. Telling your lover an ugly fact about yourself may seem to you to put your relationship at risk.

One theorist has tried to put together the various findings on self-
disclosure by suggesting that there is a curvilinear relationship between reciprocity and self-disclosure. The idea is that the rewards of reciprocity in self-disclosure increase up to a certain point; but when a couple becomes very intimate, the costs of self-disclosure become so great that it often will decrease, at least for one, if not both, partners.\(^5\)

Many of us have had the experience of confiding a deep, dark secret to someone, only to get burned for having done so. I once had a friend to whom I confided what I considered to be an intimate secret. In talking to a friend of my friend, I became painfully aware of the fact that this person, who was no friend of mine, knew every detail. Needless to say, I never confided in the so-called friend again and was, for a while, hesitant to confide in anyone.

Intimacy, then, is a foundation of love, but a foundation that develops slowly, through fits and starts, and is difficult to achieve. Moreover, once it starts to be attained, it may, paradoxically, start to go away because of the threat it poses. It poses a threat in terms not only of the dangers of self-disclosure but of the danger one starts to feel to one’s existence as a separate, autonomous being. Few people want to be “consumed” by a relationship, yet people may start to feel as if they are being consumed when they get too close to another human being. The result is a balancing act between intimacy and autonomy, which goes on throughout the lives of most couples, a balancing act in which a completely stable equilibrium is often never achieved. But this in itself is not necessarily bad: The swinging back and forth of the intimacy pendulum provides some of the excitement that keeps many relationships alive.

**Passion**

The passion component of love involves a “state of intense longing for union with the other.”\(^6\) Passion is largely the expression of desires and needs—such as for self-esteem, nurturance, affiliation, dominance, submission, and sexual fulfillment. The strengths of these various needs vary across persons, situations, and kinds of loving relationship. For example, sexual fulfillment is likely to be a strong need in romantic relationships but not in filial ones. These needs manifest themselves through psychological and physiological arousal, which are often inseparable from each other.
Passion in love can tend to interweave itself with feelings of intimacy, and often they fuel each other. For example, intimacy in a relationship may be largely a function of the extent to which the relationship meets a person’s need for passion. Conversely, passion may be aroused by intimacy. In some close relationships with members of the opposite sex, for example, the passion component develops almost immediately, and intimacy, only after a while. Passion may have drawn the individuals into the relationship in the first place, but intimacy helps sustain the closeness in the relationship. In other close relationships, however, passion, especially as it applies to physical attraction, develops only after intimacy. Two close friends of the opposite sex may find themselves eventually developing a physical attraction for each other once they have achieved a certain emotional intimacy.

Sometimes intimacy and passion work against each other. For example, in a relationship with a prostitute, a man may seek to maximize fulfillment of the need for passion while purposefully minimizing intimacy. An inverse relation between intimacy and passion can be a function of the person as well as of the situation: Some people find that the attainment of emotional closeness and intimacy actually interferes with sexual fulfillment, or that passionate involvement is detrimental to emotional intimacy. The point, quite simply, is that although the interaction between intimacy and passion will vary across people and across situations, these two components of love will almost certainly interact in close relationships in one way or another.

Most people, when they think of passion, view it as sexual – as the classic feeling of being “turned on.” But any form of psychophysiological arousal can generate the experience of passion. For example, an individual with a high need for affiliation may experience passion toward an individual who provides him or her with a unique opportunity to affiliate. That person gives the needy person the desired sense of belonging.

These patterns of response have been established through years of observation and sometimes firsthand experience, which cannot be easily undone by a social worker or anyone else in a few months. Probably the strangest learning mechanism for the buildup of passionate response is the mechanism of intermittent reinforcement, the periodic, sometimes random rewarding of a particular response to a stimulus. If
you try to accomplish something, and sometimes are rewarded for your efforts and sometimes not, you are being intermittently reinforced.

Oddly enough, intermittent reinforcement is even more powerful in continuing or sustaining a given pattern of behavior than is continuous reinforcement. You are more likely to lose interest in or desire for something, and to become bored, if you are always rewarded when you seek it than if you are sometimes rewarded, but sometimes not. Put another way, sometimes the fun is in wanting something rather than in getting it. And if you are never rewarded for a particular pattern of behavior, you are likely to give up on it ("extinguish it," as learning theorists would say), if only because of the total frustration you experience when you act in that particular way.

Passion thrives on the intermittent reinforcement that is usually most intense in the early stages of a relationship. When you want someone, sometimes you feel as if you are getting closer to him or her, and sometimes you feel you are not — an alternation that keeps the passion aroused. Thus, the little boy may, in seeking out his mother, feel for a while that he is making progress in getting her; but then he must come to terms with the fact that he can never have her in the way he wants. Those passionate feelings do not entirely disappear, however. Rather, they go into a latent state, waiting to be rekindled, usually years later, by a female peer.

The stimulus that rekindles the passion is similar to the stimulus of the past — the mother. And the pattern of intermittent reinforcement starts again, except that this time one has some hope of getting the object of desire. But if the getting or the keeping is too easy, and continuous reinforcement replaces the intermittent kind, the man may, ironically, lose interest in what he has been seeking. The same principles apply for women, but with respect to the father.

**Decision and Commitment**

The decision/commitment component of love consists of two aspects — one short-term and one long-term. The short-term aspect is the decision to love a certain other, whereas the long-term one is the commitment to maintain that love. These two aspects of the decision/commitment component of love do not necessarily occur together. The decision to love