

Social factors that influence interpersonal attraction



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Interpersonal attraction is an attraction which does not only lead to friendship but to romance as well. This is considered to be an agent which brings two people together and prevents separation. This is still a major topic within social psychology due to the fact that it discusses about the ability to love, like, dislike and hate. This is universal, as most of the world either desires friendship or romance in their lives; but according to Hume (1757), who believed that beauty is subjective rather than objective. However, researchers have defined beauty objectively through social factors such as: personal characteristics, personality, proximity, similarity and familiarity, all these shall be further inquired within this essay.

In fact, an important factor of interpersonal attraction is someone's personal characteristics that they possess, which is seen as attractive to the viewer. Physically attractiveness, in particular leads to positive stereotypes, which is defined as the halo effect. Feingold (1992) found that attractive people are seen as being intimate and more social. Thus, physical attractiveness is seen as an important interceding factor in the beginnings of a relationship formation. However, according to the matching hypothesis (Walster et al, 1966) , anyone is attracted to those who closely resemble their own physical attractiveness level. It is, thus viewed as important since attractive people gain many advantages due to positively stereotypes. Stewart (1980) has displayed that attractive people receive lighter sentences in court and receive better grades (Landy and Sigall 1974), and viewed as kinder and joyful by others (Hunsberger and Canvanagh, 1988). Nevertheless, this is not always the case in that attractive people are treated more favourably over others, since attractive women are seen as materialistic and female

criminals receive heavier sentences in court (Dermer and Thiel, 1975; Sigall and Ostrove, 1975). On the other hand, there is cultural support for the halo effect, since physically attractive people are perceived as an extrovert, supportive and adult-like figure in different cultures (Wheeler and Kim, 1997). The matching hypothesis was investigated, and a computer dance was used to randomly select men and women and the researchers found that physical attractiveness was significant instead of the computer dance (Walster et al., 1966). However this study focused on short-term relationships, but most importantly there was a lack of free-will. Nonetheless, when participants had a wider choice limit and a chance to meet beforehand, matching was evident (Walster and Walster, 1969). Another factor in which to consider are the evolutionary explanations of physical attractiveness, since it would effect mating choices and potentially, long-term relationships.

An important factor of interpersonal attraction is physical attractiveness since it has evolutionary value, and physical attractiveness is a sign for potential reproductive success. Men have nearly an infinite reproductive amount and thus seeks many in mating. Mating reaches its fullest potential when sexual mates who have high reproductive values such as, fertility, which include age and happiness are shown by appearance, for example, smooth skin and white teeth. However, women should be attracted to men who can provide the basic, social and economic needs. Both genders prefer good genetic quality, which would allow their children to live. An indicator of genetic quality are youthfulness and symmetry. Both require robust genes to be kept, this may give an explanation of why both factors are important in attractiveness. The Evolutionary explanations are supported by Waynforth

and Dunbar (1995), who researched into personal adverts and showed that more males than females prefer and seek youthful and attractive partners. Cunningham (1986) has shown that there is a cultural support about physical attractiveness such as, large eyes, small nose and chin like Disney characters. This supports the evolutionary explanation, however this cultural understanding may not be due to features that signals fertility. An alternative explanation, such as the baby face hypothesis in which 'baby' features are what adults prefer, since having baby-like qualities, shows that they can protect and provide their offspring's needs, as a result could be the reasons why people evoke feelings of attraction. Personality is just as important as the biological effects in interpersonal attraction and must be looked upon in order to understand it.

Personality is universal viewed as an important factor of interpersonal attraction. Some personality types, such as Extroversion, are seen as more attractive than other types, for example introversion, within Westernised society (Duck, 1999). Likewise, warm and competent people are liked more than others (Rubin, 1973). These attributes appear to be essential in attraction, since individuals become more interested about their partner's personality, and if their personalities relate to each other in a reciprocal way. However, personality is possibly important in the beginnings of the stages of attraction, personality that seems attractive will become less since it becomes more predictable and then it becomes dull (Felmlee, 1995). It appears that people are attracted to features which links to the successful breeding, as well as the safe child-rearing, and that such features are universally perceived as physically attractive. If, however, people were all

attracted only to those most physically attractive, it would be very difficult to find a mate. This may explain why the matching hypothesis operates. It is also possible that factors other than those explored and mentioned affect interpersonal attraction, for instance proximity.

Proximity increases liking, especially in friendship development. Research has shown that people on the bottom floor of a university-housing complex made more friends than ones on the same floor, since they would interact more (Festinger et al., 1950). Segal (1974) showed that proximity is the main factor for developing friendships easier, and that it had a stronger outcome on short-term attraction than any other factors. It has also been found that proximity can increase a dislike towards people's neighbours since they might have a greater potential to irritate them. Ebbesen et al. (1976) found that if a neighbour is argumentative, then proximity leads to irritation, hate and avoidance. The filter theory can explain why proximity is so important. This is displayed, in the Ebbesen et al. study, proximity possibly behaves as if it is an initial filter switch, in which it can be both a negative and a positive factor. It has been seen that proximity is a powerful liking determinant, on the other hand, it may be due to similarity instead of proximity, which is the primary factor in the formation of relationship and it decides whether liking similar people tend to accumulate in the same place. However, Byrne (1961) supports proximity, since he manipulated the seating arrangements, and his findings were that people who seat in the middle row became more popular, which suggests that proximity seems to be a determining factor of interpersonal attraction. However, similarity is a factor which should not be excluded, when describing relationships.

Since, Newcomb (1961) used male undergraduates for a test on friendship and his findings were that, people who have similar attitudes will likely form friendships. Similarly, Kerckhoff (1974) discovered that married partners tend to have similar social-economic, religious and educational backgrounds. There is research for a dissimilarity-repulsion hypothesis in that, participants who had more dissimilarities than similarities were less likely to form friendship and bonds (Drigotas, 1993). A possible interpretation, is that similarity provides validation for people's own belief and system, which makes them feel that they are acceptable and right. Similarly, people possibly want to avoid those who are different from they are, since it challenges their belief and system which makes them feel threatened. However, similarity seems to be important, but Rosenbaum (1986) found dissimilarity is the real factor in interpersonal attraction not similarity. However, not all supports Rosenbaum's view of dissimilarity being the driving force of interpersonal attraction, since Smeaton et al. (1989) found that between a participant and a stranger, if they were similar, they will be more likely to be attracted than when they are dissimilar. On the other hand, Snyder and Fromkin (1980) suggest that being similar to someone else could endanger their uniqueness and identity, of which those two traits are positive characteristics in Westernised society, and thus dissimilar is more attractive. Similarity and Proximity may be two factors including physical attractiveness which determines the attraction, but whether if the person is familiar might have a bigger effect on interpersonal attraction.

Familiarity is what people may simply prefer, since it is known to them and thus the greater people are exposed to someone they know, the more likely

they will be attracted. Research has investigated the 'exposure effect' in student residences. It was found that those students who had more interactions due to their living arrangements, for example, sharing facilities like the kitchen, toilet and others, had a higher chance of forming friendships with other people in the same residence (Yinon et al., 1977). Research has also investigated the relationship between familiarity and liking. The findings were that, participants preferred their own mirror image, since they were finding that participants preferred mirror-image photos of themselves, they were more familiar with acquainted with it, however friends preferred their friends photograph due to being familiar with it. (Mita et al. 1977). An interpretation of this finding could be that familiarity leads to friendships and bonds since people like predictability. It also directs to more rewarding experiences, which is known as the reinforcement-affect model.

Nevertheless, familiarity might not lead to bonding or friendship development, it may lead to disrespect and disdain. This was supported by Swap (1977), he found that the more a punished participant was exposed, the more disliking there was. However, Saegart et al. (1973) did not find that, they found that participants who were asked to score the drink's taste, the the meeting frequency with other participants was more crucial for them to determine attraction than the drink's taste. Finally, factors that cause initial attraction merge into those that create liking for another and will, in some cases, lead to a relationship. These factors act as an initial filter but also influence continued liking and thus the likelihood of a relationship being formed. Of course, some relationships form as a consequence of quite different factors. Relationships with family members may, for example, be related to sensitivity and responsiveness.

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To conclude, various social factors are indeed a determinant of interpersonal attraction, but most importantly, Interpersonal attraction is not based only on one factor, but an eclectic combination of all. It can not be simply be reduced into one factor which determines romance or friendship, it is both biological and psychological. Perhaps, a factor to consider in is culture and history, since different cultures and historical moments, attraction has differed and what may be acceptable back then may not be today. Further research on interpersonal attraction would be able to help dating agencies to work out what is the most successful criteria to match partners and to prevent divorce, and keep a long-term relationship. This is a justified reason to give research into interpersonal attraction a high priority, since what can stand in the way of friendship and true love, which can conquer all.