

Interpersonal Attraction

Of all our attitudes, the most important are undoubtedly our attitudes toward other people. The questions that often concern us most whenever we meet new people are whether or not they like us and we like them: Beyond the initial encounter, our concerns often center on how to nurture and guide the relationship from an initial liking or attraction to a deeper friendship or possibly even to intimacy and love. Accordingly, social psychologists have long been interested in the factors that promote liking or interpersonal attraction, and they have shown a willingness to study love and intimacy as well. Some of the findings have confirmed commonly held notions about liking and loving, but others have produced surprises. We begin with liking—namely, friendship and the early stages of more intimate relationships.

Liking

When Great Britain's Prince Charles married Lady Diana Spencer, social psychologists were not surprised that he married "the girl next door," a very attractive woman whom he had known for years and who shared many of his social background characteristics and attitudes. As we shall see, these are precisely the determinants of interpersonal attraction: physical attractiveness, proximity, familiarity, and similarity.

PHYSICAL ATTRACTIVENESS To most of us there is something mildly undemocratic about the possibility that a person's physical appearance is a determinant of how well others like him or her. Unlike character and personality, physical appearance is a factor over which we have little control, and hence it seems unfair to use it as a criterion for liking someone. In fact, surveys taken over a span of several decades have shown that people do not rank physical attractiveness as very important in their liking of other people (Perrin, 1921; Tesser & Brodie, 1971).

But research on actual behavior shows otherwise (see Brehm, 1992, for a review). One group of psychologists set up a "computer dance" in which college men and women were randomly paired with one another. At intermission everyone filled out an anonymous questionnaire evaluating his or her date. In addition, the experimenters obtained several personality test scores for each person, as well as an independent estimate of his or her physical attractiveness. The results showed that only physical attractiveness played a role in how much the person was liked by his or her partner. None of the measures of intelligence, social skills, or personality were related to the partners' liking for one another (Walster, Aronson, Abrahams, & Rottmann, 1966). Moreover, the importance of physical attractiveness continues to operate not only on first dates but on subsequent ones as well (Mathes, 1975).

The importance of physical attractiveness is not confined just to dating and mating patterns. For example, physically attractive boys and girls (5 and 6 years of age) are more popular with their peers than are less attractive children (Dion & Berscheid, 1972). Even adults are affected by a child's physical attractiveness. One investigator had women read a description of an aggressive act committed by a 7-year-old child. The description was accom-

panied by a photograph of either an attractive or an unattractive child. The women believed that the attractive child was less likely than the unattractive child to commit a similar aggressive act in the future (Dion, 1972).

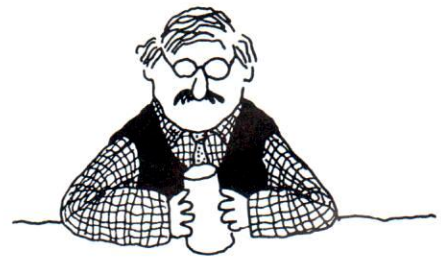
Why is physical attractiveness so important? Part of the reason is that our own social standing and self-esteem are enhanced when we are seen with physically attractive companions. Both men and women are rated more favorably when they are with an attractive romantic partner or friend than when they are with an unattractive companion (Sheposh, Deming, & Young, 1977; Sigall & Landy, 1973). But there is an interesting twist to this: both men and women are rated less favorably when they are seen with a *stranger* who is physically more attractive than they (Kernis & Wheeler, 1981). Apparently they suffer by comparison when compared with the other person. This effect has been found in other studies. For example, male college students who had just watched a television show starring beautiful young women gave lower attractiveness ratings to a photograph of a more typical-looking woman—as did both men and women who were first shown a photograph of a highly attractive woman (Kenrick & Gutierrez, 1980).

Fortunately, there is hope for the unbeautiful among us. First of all, physical attractiveness appears to decline in importance when a permanent partner is being chosen (Stroebe, Insko, Thompson, & Layton, 1971). And, as we shall see, several other factors can work in our favor.

PROXIMITY An examination of 5,000 marriage license applications in Philadelphia in the 1930s found that one-third of the couples lived within five blocks of each other (Rubin, 1973). Research shows that the best single predictor of whether two people are friends is how far apart they live. In a study of friendship patterns in apartment houses, residents were asked to name the three people they saw socially most often. Residents mentioned 41 percent of neighbors who lived in the apartment next door, 22 percent of those who lived two doors away (about 30 feet) and only 10 percent of those who lived at the other end of the hall (Festinger, Schachter, & Back, 1950).

Studies of college dormitories show the same effect. After a full academic year, roommates were twice as likely as floormates to be friends, and floormates were more than twice as likely as dormitory residents in general to be friends (Priest & Sawyer, 1967). A study of male trainees at the Training Academy of the Maryland State Police is even more striking. The academy assigns trainees to dormitory rooms and classroom seats by name in alphabetical order. Thus the closer two trainees' last names are alphabetically, the more likely they are to spend time in close proximity to one another. The researchers asked trainees who had been at the academy for 6 months to name their three closest friends there. Despite an intensive training course in which all trainees get to know one another quite well, there was a strong alphabetical proximity effect. On the average, each person chosen as a best friend was only 4.5 letters away from the person who chose him—an alphabetical proximity significantly closer than the 15.3 letters expected by chance (Segal, 1974).

There are cases, of course, in which neighbors and roommates hate one another, and the major exception to the friendship-promoting effect of proximity seems to occur when there are initial antagonisms. In a test of this, a subject waited in a laboratory with a female confederate who treated the subject pleasantly or unpleasantly. When she was pleasant, the closer she sat to the subject the better she was liked; when she was unpleasant, the closer she sat to the subject, the less she was liked. Proximity simply increased the



Certainly, unbeknownst to William Evans, the perfect woman for him is a waitress in Caracas named Ramona. Good luck, Bill.
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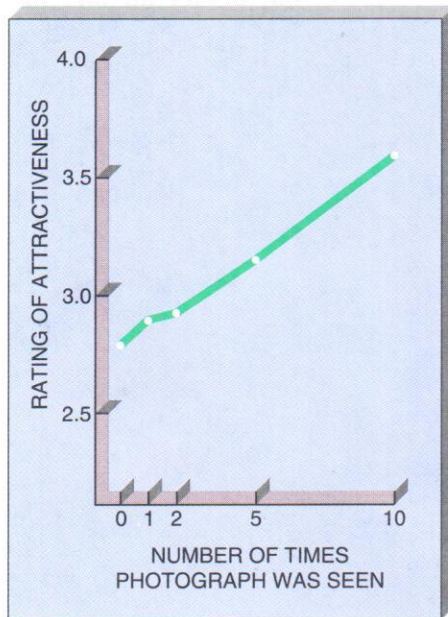


FIGURE 18-4
Familiarity Breeds Liking *Subjects were asked to rate photographs of unknown faces according to how much they thought they would like the person. The lowest ratings of liking were made by subjects who had never seen the photograph before; the highest ratings of liking were made by subjects who had seen the photograph most often. (After Zajonc, 1968)*

intensity of the initial reaction (Schiffenbauer & Schiavo, 1976). But because most initial encounters probably range from neutral to pleasant, the most frequent result of sustained proximity is friendship.

Those who believe in miracles when it comes to matters of the heart may believe that there is a perfect mate chosen for each of us waiting to be discovered somewhere in the world. But if this is true, the far greater miracle is the frequency with which Fate conspires to place this person within walking distance.

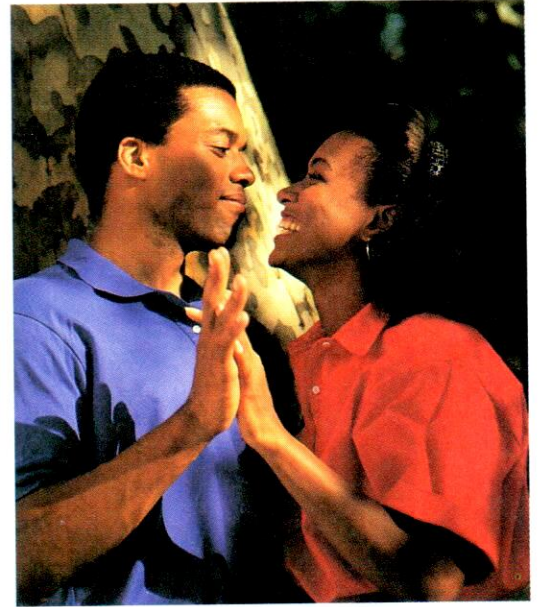
FAMILIARITY One of the major reasons that proximity creates liking is that it increases *familiarity*, and there is now abundant research that familiarity all by itself—sheer exposure—increases liking (Zajonc, 1968). This *familiarity-breeds-liking* effect is a very general phenomenon. For example, rats repeatedly exposed to either the music of Mozart or Schoenberg come to prefer the composer they have heard, and humans repeatedly exposed to selected nonsense syllables or Chinese characters come to prefer those they have seen most often. The effect even occurs when individuals are unaware that they have been previously exposed to the stimuli (Moreland & Zajonc, 1979; Wilson, 1979). More germane to the present discussion is a study in which subjects were exposed to pictures of faces and then asked how much they thought they would like the person shown. The more frequently they had seen a particular face, the more they said they liked it and thought they would like the person (Zajonc, 1968)—(see Figure 18-4). Similar results are obtained when individuals are exposed to one another in actual interaction.

In one clever demonstration of the familiarity-breeds-liking effect, the investigators took photographs of college women and then prepared prints of both the original face and its mirror image. These prints were then shown to the women themselves, their female friends, and their lovers. The women themselves preferred the mirror-image prints by a margin of 68 percent to 32 percent, but the friends and lovers preferred the nonreversed prints by a margin of 61 percent to 39 percent (Mita, Dermer, & Knight, 1977). Can you guess why?

The moral is clear. If you are not beautiful or you find your admiration of someone unreciprocated, be persistent and hang around. Proximity and familiarity are your most powerful weapons.

SIMILARITY An old saying declares that opposites attract, and lovers are fond of recounting how different they are from each other: “I love boating, but she prefers mountain climbing.” “I’m in engineering, but he’s a history major.” What such lovers overlook is that they both like outdoor activities; they are both preprofessionals; they are both Democrats; they are both the same nationality; the same religion; the same social class; the same educational level; and they are probably within 3 years of each other in age and within 5 IQ points of each other in intelligence. In short, the old saying is mostly false.

Research all the way back to 1870 supports this conclusion. Over 99 percent of the married couples in the United States are of the same race, and most are of the same religion. Moreover, statistical surveys show that husbands and wives are significantly similar to each other not only in sociological characteristics—such as age, race, religion, education, and socioeconomic class—but also with respect to psychological characteristics like intelligence and physical characteristics such as height and eye color (Rubin, 1973). A study of dating couples finds the same patterns, in addition to finding that



couples were also similar in their attitudes about sexual behavior and sex roles. Moreover, couples who were most similar in background at the beginning of the study were most likely to be together 1 year later (Hill, Rubin, & Peplau, 1976). Of particular pertinence to our earlier discussion is the finding that couples are closely matched on physical attractiveness as well (Berscheid & Walster, 1978).

For example, in one study, judges rated photographs of each partner of 99 couples for physical attractiveness without knowing who was paired with whom. The physical attractiveness ratings of the couples matched each other significantly more closely than did the ratings of photographs that were randomly paired into couples (Murstein, 1972). Similar results were obtained in a real-life field study in which separate observers rated the physical attractiveness of members of couples in bars and theater lobbies and at social events (Silverman, 1971).

This matching of couples on physical attractiveness appears to come about because we weigh a potential partner's attractiveness against the probability that the person would be willing to pair up with us. Put bluntly, less attractive people seek less attractive partners because they expect to be rejected by someone more attractive than themselves. A study of a video dating service found that both men and women were most likely to pursue a relationship with someone who matched them in physical attractiveness. Only the most attractive people sought dates with the most attractive partners (Folkes, 1982). The overall result of this chilling marketplace process is attractiveness similarity: most of us end up with partners who are about as attractive as we are.

But similarities on dimensions other than physical attractiveness are probably even more important over the long-term course of a relationship. A longitudinal study of 135 married couples, discussed in Chapter 13, found that spouses who were more similar to each other in personality also resembled each other more in terms of how much they enjoyed similar daily activities like visiting friends, going out for dinner, and participating in community activities and professional meetings. These couples also

The saying "opposites attract" is a myth: couples tend to have many common attributes.

reported less marital conflict and greater closeness, friendliness, and marital satisfaction than less similar spouses (Caspi & Herbener, 1990).

In an ambitious study of similarity and friendship, male students received free room for the year in a large house at the University of Michigan in exchange for their participation. On the basis of information from tests and questionnaires, some men were assigned roommates who were quite similar to them and others were assigned roommates who were quite dissimilar. The investigator observed the friendship patterns that developed over the course of the year, obtaining more questionnaire and attitude data from the participants at regular intervals. In all other respects the men lived as they would in any dormitory.

Roommates who were initially similar generally liked each other and ended up as better friends than those who were dissimilar. When the study was repeated with a new group of men the next year, however, the familiarity-breeds-liking effect turned out to be even more powerful than similarity. Regardless of whether low or high similarity had been the basis for room assignments, roommates came to like each other (Newcomb, 1961).

One reason that similarity produces liking is probably that people value their own opinions and preferences and enjoy being with others who validate their choices, possibly boosting their self-esteem in the process. But perhaps the major reason that similarity produces liking is just a repeat of factors we have seen before—proximity and familiarity. Both social norms and situational circumstances throw us together with people who are like us. Most religious groups prefer (or insist) that their members date and mate within the religion, and cultural norms regulate what is considered acceptable in terms of race and age matches—a couple comprising an older woman and a younger man is still viewed as inappropriate. Situational circumstances also play an important role. Many couples meet in college or graduate school, thus assuring that they will be similar in educational level, general intelligence, professional aspirations, and probably in age and socioeconomic status. Moreover, tennis players will have met on the tennis courts, political liberals at a pro-choice rally, and gay people at a meeting of the Gay People's Union.

Despite all this, it is often suggested that the saying that opposites attract may still apply to certain complementary personality traits (Winch, Ktsanes, & Ktsanes, 1954). To take the most obvious example, one partner may be quite dominant and thus require someone who is relatively more submissive. A person with strong preferences may do best with someone who is very flexible or even wishy-washy. But despite the plausibility of this complementarity hypothesis, there is not much evidence for it (Levinger, Senn, & Jorgensen, 1970). In one study, marital adjustment among couples married for up to 5 years was found to depend more on similarity than on complementarity (Meyer & Pepper, 1977). Attempts to identify the pairs of personality traits that bring about complementarity have not been very successful (Strong et al., 1988). When all is said and done, it is similarity that wins the day.

Love

LIKING AND LOVING Love is more than just intense liking. Most of us know people we like very much but do not love, and some of us have experienced even passionate love for someone we do not particularly like. Research confirms these everyday observations. One of the first researchers to