

Similarity and Positivity of Self-Description as Determinants of Estimated Appraisal and Attraction*

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One way to conceptualize interpersonal attraction is to place it within a dyadic framework of mutual evaluation and appraisal. Two variables that may influence our beliefs about how others evaluate us are congruence (the fit between their preferences and our attributes and behavior) and similarity of personalities. In a 2 x 2 factorial design, the congruence of subjects' self-descriptions with a stranger's preferences was shown to affect their estimates of the stranger's appraisal, but similarity of self-descriptions did not. In turn, both estimated appraisal and the congruence of the stranger's attributes with subjects' preferences influenced attraction. In general, one is attracted to others who are evaluatively positive, both as the source and object of appraisal.

One way to conceptualize interpersonal attraction is within a dyadic framework of mutual evaluation. For example, Aronson and his colleagues (e.g., Jones *et al.*, 1972; Mettee and Aronson, 1974) have argued that attraction is determined by appraisal received from others in the form of various types of evaluation. However, in the research paradigm they employ, evaluative feedback is manipulated by the experimenter, and therefore, the issue of the appraisal's antecedents has not received attention. By studying the determinants of interpersonal appraisal, its effects on attraction may be further delineated.

Research in the field of interpersonal attraction and evaluation suggests that there are two independent variables that might influence our beliefs about how

others evaluate us. First, people positively evaluate an actor who conforms to their expectations (Santee and VanDerPol, 1976) and whose attributes are congruent with their preferences (Fishbein and Coombs, 1974; Grush *et al.*, 1975). Based on these findings, we predict that an actor will estimate appraisal from others as a function of the degree of congruence between his or her attributes and the other's preferences. Hypothetically an actor's estimate of another's appraisal is influenced by the belief that he or she has

characteristics which the other approves or prefers; in turn, this anticipation of appraisal determines the actor's attraction to the other person.

Personality similarity, which appears to have an effect on attraction and some forms of evaluation (Byrne, 1971), is a second and competing explanation of how people estimate others' appraisal. It could be argued that it is personality similarity and not congruence that influences estimates of others' appraisal, or that both similarity and congruence affect estimated appraisal, or even that the two variables interact in their effects. For example, similarity might affect estimates of appraisal only when congruence is high, i.e., when the stranger approves of the attributes with which the subject describes him- or herself. Thus, in a 2 x 2 factorial design, we initially examined the effects of both congruence and personality similarity on estimates of a stranger's appraisal. Then, we looked at the impact of estimated appraisal on subject's attraction.

METHOD

Subjects were 86 introductory psychology students, randomly assigned to one of four conditions: 2 levels of personality similarity by 2 levels of congruence. Twelve self-descriptors with relatively neutral likability ratings were chosen from Anderson's (1968) list and presented as unipolar items. (Items with neutral likabil-

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Factors of Attraction*

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ity ratings were chosen in order not to confound the effects of social desirability with the effects of similarity and congruence.) Responses on this Self-Description Questionnaire were made along a 6-point scale from 1 ("Unlike Me") through 6 ("Like Me"). On a second instrument containing the same 12 items-the Expectation Questionnaire-the subjects' preferences for a peer's attributes were measured by responses of "Disapproval" (1) or "Approval" (6).

Subjects first responded to the 12-item Self-Description Questionnaire. Each subject was then given a completed Self-Description Questionnaire and an Expectation Questionnaire, and was informed that both had been completed by another student of the subject's own sex. The stranger's responses had been constructed so as to create one of two levels of similarity and one of two levels of congruence. That is, the stranger approved of either 2 or 10 of the subject's 12 self-descriptions, and was similar to the subject on either 2 or 10 of the items.

Subjects were told to form an impression of the person and to "put yourself in the other student's place," estimating how that student would react to the subject's own self-description. Estimates were made on the Interpersonal Judgment Scale (Byrne, 1971) which had been modified to help the subject think about the stranger's perspective. For example, estimates of positive appraisal could be indicated by the subject's checking the following alternatives: "This person will probably like me" and "This person would enjoy working with me in an experiment." After completion, the modified Interpersonal Judgment Scale and the subject's Self-Description Questionnaire were collected and a standard Interpersonal Judgment Scale was distributed. Using information contained in the stranger's two questionnaires, subjects evaluated the stranger and reported their attraction. Finally, subjects indicated their own preferences for a peer.

RESULTS

As shown in Table 1, congruence but not similarity of self-description affects

Table 1. Estimated Appraisal as a Function of Similarity and Congruence Between Subject's Self Description and Stranger's Preferences

| Subject's Congruence | Similarity of Self Description | | |
|----------------------|--------------------------------|------|------|
| | Low | High | Mean |
| Low | 6.9 | 7.7 | 7.3 |
| High | 9.4 | 10.3 | 9.8 |
| Mean | 8.3 | 9.0 | |

subjects' estimates of a stranger's appraisal. When shown a stranger's preferences for attributes in a peer, subjects' estimates of appraisal are a function of the congruence of their own attributes with those preferences [$F(1,82)=28.75, p<.0011$]. The similarity of their self-descriptions has no significant influence [$F(1,82)=3.25, n.s.$], nor does its interaction with congruence [$F(1,82)<1$].

Additionally, estimates of appraisal are hypothesized to affect the subject's attraction to the stranger. However, as indicated previously, studies have shown that people are attracted to an actor whose attributes are congruent with their preferences (e.g., Grush *et al.*, 1975). Therefore, attraction is hypothesized to be a dual function of (a) subject's estimate of the other's appraisal, and (b) congruence between the subject's preferences and the stranger's self-descriptions. These propositions were tested in a 2 x 2 analysis of variance. Subjects' estimates of the stranger's appraisal were dichotomized at the median (8.6). The stranger's congruence, which was calculated as the sum of the absolute discrepancies between the stranger's self-descriptions and the subject's preferences on each of the 12 items, was also dichotomized at the median (21.5). As depicted in Table 2, both estimated appraisal and congruence influence attraction [$F(1,82)=8.74, p<.01$; $F(1,82)=27.03, p<.001$, respectively].

DISCUSSION

In sum, these findings demonstrate that people are attracted to another from

¹ The Pearson correlation between subjects' attraction to the stranger and their estimates of the stranger's appraisal is .40 ($n=86$).

Table 2. Subject's Attraction as a Function of Estimated Appraisal and Congruence Between Stranger's Self Description and Subject's Preferences

| Estimated Appraisal | Stranger's Congruence | | Mean |
|---------------------|-----------------------|------|------|
| | Low | High | |
| Low | 6.8 | 8.6 | 7.5 |
| High | 7.5 | 10.6 | 9.3 |
| Mean | 7.1 | 9.7 | |

whom they anticipate positive appraisal and who has attributes they prefer. However, the attributes one prefers in another may or may not be similar to one's own attributes. In our sample, those attributes that students approved in a peer were generally the same as those they used to describe themselves. Even so, a substantial proportion of our subjects ($n=18$) indicated a preference for peers with attributes dissimilar to their own. For them, the total absolute discrepancy between their self-descriptions and their preferences for peers on the 12-item questionnaires was 12 or more points ($M=14.3$). Even in college peer relationships, people do not always prefer the same attributes in others and themselves.

Not only are we attracted to people with attributes we prefer, others' appraisal has an additional impact. People are attractive when an actor anticipates positive appraisal from them. This appraisal is inferred on the basis of the "fit" or congruence between the actor's attributes and the others' preferences. Similarity of self-descriptions does not make a contribution to estimated appraisal when information about another's preferences is present. People realize that sometimes others do not prefer similarity and may actually prefer dissimilarity in interpersonal relationships.

That the "fit" between preference and attribute determines attraction, but similarity of self description does not, underscores the general finding in the literature that attitudinal variables, such as preferences, are of prime importance in understanding attraction. Even so, as previous research has shown (Santee, 1976), attraction is not determined simply by attitude similarity either. Rather, attraction is affected only by attitude similarity that in-

forms the person about the incentive qualities of his or her relationship to another. Thus, similarity per se does not seem to be the operative variable in interpersonal attraction; instead, attraction is determined by the evaluative implications of whatever information people obtain about each other.

As a general principle, one is attracted to others who are evaluatively positive, both as the source and object of appraisal. This proposition ties together research which has looked at the impact of congruence on attraction (e.g., Backman and Secord, 1962) and research emphasizing the importance of appraisal (e.g., Mettee and Aronson, 1974). Our experience with the world tells us that others seldom directly communicate their evaluations of us. Yet, the way others define us is a crucial determinant of our behavior, and since interpersonal evaluations are seldom communicated in a clear, explicit form, inferences must be made on the basis of other information. One type of information used in making this inference is an understanding of how well we live up to another's expectations and preferences.

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