

EFFECTS OF TYPE OF INFORMATION UPON INTERPERSONAL ATTRACTION

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Evaluation of strangers can be based on assessments of either available cues or inferred characteristics. Many studies of interpersonal attraction present participants with information on others' psychological characteristics (personality, traits, attitudes), but it is argued that additional, "external" information about others is normally available to interacting individuals and provides a basis for evaluative inferences while constituting a context in which the impact of any available psychological information would be assessed. Two experiments are reported: one in which presentation of external information about a stranger evoked significantly ($p < .025$) higher attraction ratings than available psychological information; and a second where similarity of participant and other on external characteristics had greater effects upon attraction scores than did similarity of psychological characteristics. Results are consistent with the view that external information provides a modifying context in which the attractiveness of psychological information is assessed and suggest two distinct stages in attraction responses.

Keywords: interpersonal attraction, type of information, available cues, inferred characteristics.

The evaluation of others in terms of attractiveness is an affective response possible at two levels: in terms of the information directly available and in terms of characteristics inferred or believed to hold true of the individual assessed. Ajzen (1974) has argued that participants evaluate information presented to them but that fortuitous discovery of similarity to the other on this information exerts undue influence on the assessment process. Similarity, he argues, is usually found related to interpersonal attraction merely because similarity tends to be correlated with the affective value of information about a stranger provided to a participant. Participants who are presented with information on attitudes can and do make inferences about the personality of individuals holding such attitudes. However, it has been shown (Duck, 1975) that while participants *assume* similarity when direct information is not available, the usual attitude-similarity-attraction relationship is

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clearly modified and adjusted when further psychological information about a stranger is provided.

In the normal course of everyday events, additional context for attitude similarity is readily available to interacting individuals. Information on attitudes (or any other psychological characteristics) is consequent on some form of interaction and *a fortiori* on some form of evaluation of subjectively available cues. Thus attitude similarity from obnoxious others has been found to be less attractive than such similarity with pleasant others (Taylor & Mettee, 1971) and attraction levels are lower when similar others are seen to be mentally disturbed (Bleda, 1974), unduly familiar (Scherwitz & Helmreich, 1973) or antipathetic to the participant (Stephan, 1973). Context is thus a key modifier of attraction responses (Saegert et al., 1973).

It is clear from other lines of research that one forceful supplier of both context and inference is to be found in physical attractiveness (Stroebe et al., 1971). Indeed, Dion et al. (1972) report further that physical attractiveness exerts a powerful influence on the kinds of inferences which observers make about personality characteristics. This outcome can be seen as an extreme and striking form of processes which relate to a whole continuum of physical cues which have subjective value for inference purposes. Whilst studies on physical *attractiveness* are frequent, it is unusual to find studies of physical or "external" *description* of others, or of physical characteristics which do not contribute *directly* to attractiveness scores (such as dress, hair color). Such items do not constitute simple evaluative judgments of others' attractiveness although it is clear that in everyday interactions they may well provide information upon which such judgments could be based. A full understanding of acquaintance processes requires that the value of such information be inspected and its effect on attraction scores gauged. By contrast, studies manipulating the effects of psychological information (attitudes or personality) do not concern themselves solely with selected attractive (or unattractive) attitudes so much as with information about the psychological attributes which subjects have. Most often a range of attitudes is presented and evaluation of their overall impact is a matter for the participant. Whilst Ajzen (1974) shows that inferences can be made from attitudes to personality characteristics, it is equally likely that participants would make use of physical or "external" descriptive information if it were available. If such factual, external or physical information (rather than information *a priori* evaluatively loaded in terms of physical attractiveness) is presented to participants in conjunction with psychological information then the *relative* functional powers of the two types of information can be assessed. This also reflects real-life acquainting to a degree, since there the evaluation of such cues and consequent inferences to personality characteristics permits individuals to infer also the degree of psychological similarity which may exist between themselves and a new acquaintance. To the extent that physical similarity existed between two individuals, the assumption of other levels of similarity would be facilitated and assessment of external information thus also operates as a

means of providing context for the assessment of subsequent information on psychological attributes. Hitherto, psychological studies of interpersonal attraction have frequently provided participants with direct information of psychological attributes in ways which perform omit much contextual background and which may thus elicit wilder and less representative response activity. However, the indirect nature of much information available during acquaintance does not automatically rule it out as a force for attraction, especially as it provides a solid base for the interpretation of subsequently-gathered pure psychological information on attitudes and personality. Accordingly two experiments are reported here: one is a preliminary study of the relative influences of two types of information on attraction scores and the second examines the influence of levels of similarity on the two kinds of information between participants and a hypothetical stranger.

The first experiment is directed, therefore, to the question of whether external descriptions (factual or physical characteristics) can exert an influence on attraction scores or whether they are irrelevant; and of whether such external information is relatively more or less powerful an influence on attraction scores than information on psychological attributes. It is predicted that participants presented with information on the "external properties" of a stranger will use it as a basis for attraction responses, since it represents the contextual information normally available at early points in acquaintance; whereas psychological information is too early to be of similar value in real assessments of strangers and will evoke lower attraction ratings.

METHOD FOR EXPERIMENT ONE

Independent variables were to be type of information about others (psychological traits; "external" descriptions), while the dependent measure was attraction rating. This design requires a priori equivalence of the two sets of information to eliminate the possibility that one list fortuitously contains more positively-evaluated adjectives, thus undermining the hypothesis that *type* of information is the key variable. In a preliminary study to prepare and select equivalent lists of stimulus words, 50 participants were presented with lists of 120 adjectives which they rated individually for attractiveness (Anderson, 1968). Average ratings for each adjective were computed and items were then selected for the two stimulus lists in such a way that items in the "external" and the "psychological" list were matched for mean evaluation and standard deviation. The two lists were thus evaluatively equivalent and differed only in the *type* of information which they supplied. Each list contained 11 adjectives and examples from the lists are: ("external") young, athletic, long hair; ("psychological") clever, cool-headed, confident. Forty participants took part in this preliminary experiment (20 of each sex) and all were student volunteers from Lancaster University. Participants were presented with one of these lists (in an order selected at random) and were told that the adjectives described another individual of the

participant's own sex. Participants gave this individual an attractiveness rating from 1 to 10 and were then given the same task with the other list, being told that this described a different person of participant's own sex.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The experimental procedures provide two attraction measures from each participant; one based on "external" information about a stranger and one based on psychological information. These ratings are thus suitable for test by Student's *t* test for the paired case, which yielded $t = 2.3809$, $df = 39$, $p < .025$ and showed as predicted that external information produced significantly higher attraction scores than did psychological information.

This pilot finding supports the original contentions and suggests that external information has a primary significance to participants at this stage of acquaintance, which overrides the impact of psychological information. However, an alternative explanation of the findings is that similarity rather than type of information is most relevant and by chance greater levels of similarity existed between participant and other on the external information than on the psychological information. The fact that this argument would support rather than undermine the hypothesis, since it makes the very point at issue, need not obscure the fact that the pilot study fails to provide an answer either way. To meet these objections and to further strengthen the support for the hypothesis, a second experiment was performed to examine the simultaneous manipulation of similarity levels in the two kinds of information and the extent to which one type overrode the effects of the other.

The predictions are clear here. The widely established effects of psychological information on attraction scores will lead to a main effect of psychological information similarity level. If external information similarity level does operate as some baseline influence on the impact of psychological information then a main effect of this variable will be found also. This would show a contextual or modifying effect "across the board" and there should, for the same reason, be no interaction effect.

METHOD FOR EXPERIMENT TWO

The aim was to examine the effects of context and the relative powers of similarity of two types of information to influence attraction ratings and a 2 x 2 design therefore manipulated external information similarity level x psychological information similarity level, the 2 levels being 75% and 25% similarity to participant. The dependent variable was again attraction rating. The experiment followed the hypothetical stranger paradigm (Byrne, 1971) using information descriptions instead of the more usual attitudes. The lists of descriptions were the same as in Experiment I and thus had equivalent objective valences.

The 40 participants (again 20 of each sex) completed one self-description on each list of traits used in Experiment I and were then given, one week later, one scale of each type *both* purportedly from one other participant of the same sex as the participant. The order in which different participants were given each scale was randomized to eliminate order effects and the level of similarity on those scales to those of the participant was manipulated as experimental conditions required. Participants rated the likableness of the stranger on a scale from 1 to 10 and were then thanked and debriefed.

RESULTS OF EXPERIMENT TWO

A two-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) on the attraction ratings as a function of two types-plus-levels of similarity gave a significant effect of psychological information similarity level ($F = 4.95$; $df = 1, 36$; $p < .05$) and a very highly significant effect of external information similarity level ($F = 15.7$; $df = 1, 36$; $p < .001$) with a nonsignificant interaction ($F < 1$) as can be seen in Table 1.

TABLE 1
EFFECTS OF PSYCHOLOGICAL AND "EXTERNAL" SIMILARITY LEVELS ON
ATTRACTION RATING

Source	<i>df</i>	as	ms	<i>F</i>
Psychological similarity level	1	10.5	10.5	4.95*
External similarity level	1	33.3	33.3	15.7**
Interaction.....	1	0.17	0.17	<1
Error	36	76.13	2.12	
Total	39	120.10		

Note: * $p < .05$, $df = 1, 36$; ** $p < .001$, $df = 1, 36$.

The effects of psychological similarity were predicted on the basis of the wealth of previous evidence (Byrne & Griffit, 1973) and are not surprising. More compelling is the highly significant effect of *similarity* in external characteristics (not limited here to physical characteristics or measures of physical attractiveness). Both this finding and the nonsignificant interaction indicate that the impact of psychological information is palpably moderated in the presence of information on external characteristics and that this happens across the board (Figure 1). Indeed the contribution to the variance made by external characteristics is about three times as great as that made by psychological information.

The results thus provide empirical support for the claim that external information is salient in first encounters and that it provides a background against which the valence of other forms of similarity can be evaluated. It thus modifies the effects of similarity in psychological attributes which are themselves evaluated and assessed.

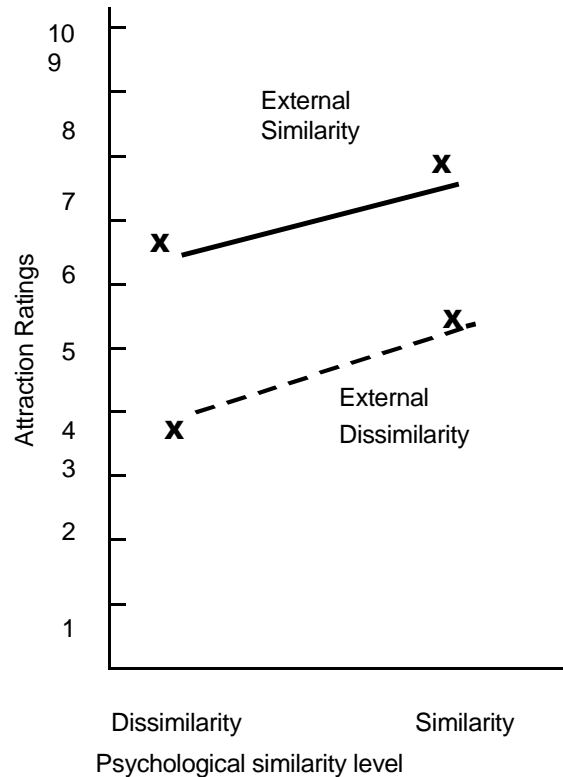


Figure 1: Attraction ratings as a function of psychological and external similarity levels.

DISCUSSION

Two findings have been reported here: first, that a type of information not normally presented to participants in attraction research has a more powerful effect upon attraction responses than does the type of information which is usually presented; and second, that even when both types are manipulated in the hypothetical stranger paradigm, “external” information proves to be more powerful an effect upon attraction levels than does psychological similarity. Qualitative and functional distinctions are thus apparent between the types of information normally available in experiments on interpersonal attraction and other kinds of information normally available about a stimulus individual. Similarity of attitudes or personality amounts to depth information about psychological attributes which would normally be assessed along with and in relation to its context. Immediate or too early exposure to such material without additional information denies participants the chance sensibly to assess its true significance (e.g., to assess whether similarity is real or feigned; due to ingratiation or true belief) and to form the more structured and reliable judgments which are possible, given more normal contextual information and more

time in which to digest it. However, Experiment II shows that *manipulation* of psychological similarity levels does affect ratings (Table 1) and it may thus be too simplistic to argue that direct psychological information is not relevant to initial attraction ratings, at least if one accepts that the experimental measures themselves do not create artifacts. (When presented with such information participants use it, but may not normally gather it in the same form at that stage when left to their own devices.) The results of both experiments suggest that, whatever importance psychological information possesses, it is nevertheless of secondary importance to external information at *the stage of initial attraction*: Experiment I indicates this directly and it can be inferred from the different significance levels in Experiment II, or from Figure 1. A likely explanation of this phenomenon is that direct psychological information is perplexing to participants (Banikotes et al., 1972) and when presented with it directly and on its own, as in Experiment I, participants are more ambivalent in their use of it. Without surrounding context it constitutes a kind of information which is more difficult to visualize and interpret, by the very nature of its content. As such, it would for most people be likely to constitute a less stable, comfortable and safe basis for the erection of a "model" of the other; and the absence of other external and contextual information could simply emphasize this.

An alternative explanation which is not, however, entirely inconsistent with the above, is more consonant with other reports in the literature — especially those outlined in the Introduction (Ajzen, 1974; Duck, 1975). This possibility views early parts of acquaintance (first encounter, initial attraction) as foci both for assessment of the other *and* for inference about him, although many experiments concentrate only on the assessment processes. Given the hypothesis (Byrne, 1971) that similarity is one powerful reinforcer for attraction, then a plausible corollary suggests that evaluations of others at the stage of initial encounters are partly assessments of the attractiveness of characteristics presently available for inspection and partly assessments of the level of similarity which can be inferred from the information and context supplied. If the main focus of acquaintance falls upon the search for psychological similarity (Duck, 1973a, 1973b) then would-be acquainters are faced with two cognate problems: "Would I appreciate similarity from this person if there is any?" and "Is there indeed any similarity between us?" Since it is clear that similarity is not of itself always attractive (Byrne & Lamberth, 1971), much of the early part of acquaintance is likely to be concerned with assessing the value of the other as a social comparison stimulus before actual or implied similarity levels are assessed. A sequential process such as this can account for the greater importance of external, contextual cues in initial encounter since they provide a model of the person (as opposed to a model of his personality only) and would allow such things as socioeconomic background, race, and position to be gauged. Psychological information assumes increasing importance within this context as the acquaintance proceeds, even though it fulfills a diminished role at early points until the individual is able to erect a more substantial model of the other person. Such a model must be based on more than

simply information about psychological characteristics since direct access to such information necessarily omits the stage at which the value of any similarity may be gauged. Cues which can provide context and structure do therefore, as these experiments show, serve a primary function at the stage of initial encounter.

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