The Effects of Similarity or Complementarity on Interpersonal Attraction

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Abstract

Do birds of a feather flock together, or do opposites attract more with regard to interpersonal attraction? Are we more attracted to someone who is more similar to us or who has opposite personality traits and therefore complements us? Fifty Hanover College students were selected at random to receive a questionnaire through email asking questions about their own personality as well those of a hypothetical partner. This was designed to correlate the answers between self and hypothetical partner to determine attraction to similar or complementary personality traits. In addition, there were two versions of the questionnaire. One asked about a hypothetical partner in the context of a first date (short-term), and the other in the context of a serious relationship (long-term). When a correlational test was run, the mean for correlation between self and partner among short-term was about 0.1, and the mean for correlation between self and partner among long-term was about 0.35. The results show that most people who are going on a first date with someone are open to different types of personalities and may not be as determined to look for a certain personality type. The long-term relationship results, however, show that many people look for personality types that are similar to their own.
Effects of Similarity or Complementarity on Attraction

Introduction

Do birds of a feather flock together, or do opposites attract more? Which leads to more stable relationships? The idea that “birds of a feather flock together” suggests that two people with more similarities than differences will be attracted to each other. The concept that opposites attract holds that people who complement each other in their personality types will be attracted to each other. Luo and Zhang (2009) found that reciprocity accounts for attraction in some individuals. This is the idea that one individual is more attracted to individuals who show an interest in him-/herself. Another interesting possible factor is security, which could be more or less important, depending on the relationship. Many relationships stem from a combination of similarity and complementarity, but I want to find out which, if there is one, is more prevalent.

Two people can be similar or complementary in several ways. Some examples of ways in which people can be similar are having similar views, similar personality types, similar attitudes, similar preferences, and similar tasks. According to Zuo and Gao, Singh, and Senn (2008), these similarities can lead to a healthy relationship, but according to Luo and Zhang and Hoffman, similarities do not always have a significant effect. Certain complementary personality traits, however, do have the potential to lead to higher relationship quality. Dryer and Horowitz (1997) found that partners who are complementary in dominance/submissiveness are more attracted to each other than partners who are more similar in dominance or submissiveness. These studies have given me ideas about what to expect as well as some ideas for the procedure of my study.

Similarity
The articles exploring similarities look at the different ways in which partners can be similar and the effects of this on relationships. Zuo and Gao (2008) found that similarity has a more significant impact on interpersonal attraction than familiarity. They also divided similarity into two distinct categories: Ex-similarity and in-similarity. The term “ex-similarity” referred to the group of individuals whose personalities were opposites (complementary), and the term “in-similarity” referred to the group of individuals whose personalities were more similar. The results showed that participants were more attracted to strangers who were not as similar and acquaintances who were more similar. Luo and Zhang (August, 2009) also look into physical attraction and find that it is the “strongest predictor of attraction for both sexes.” This means that the similarity hypothesis was supported.

There are also different aspects of relationships. For example, there are different levels/stages of relationships that we can study. Tidwell, Eastwick, and Finkel’s (2013) article specifically focuses on the initial stages of relationships and the role(s) of similarities in this stage. Their findings showed that in a short-term situation, such as speed-dating, people rely on their perception of similarity to guide their liking of someone, even if the two individuals are not actually similar. This relates to my research question by providing background information about the initial stages of attraction. They also found that this mostly pertained to individuals whose similarities were assessed generally instead of specifically. This helps me to understand how the initial stages of attraction should be accurately assessed. Barelds and Barelds’ (2007) study explored love at first sight. They found that couples who fell under this category were not as similar in personality as those
who had known each other for a longer time. The quality of the relationship was not lower for those who had love at first sight. Similarity was only related to relationship quality when analyzing specific traits. This explains why subjects who were dissimilar (just met) were more attracted to each other only if they were assessed generally in Barels and Barels’ study. Singh's research also produced findings that support the similarity hypothesis. In his experiment, attitude similarity did have a strong effect on attraction. Specifically, he found that attitude similarity plays a larger role in attraction than personality similarity. Also exploring similarities, the study performed by Herbst, Gaertner, and Insko (2003) explores the effects of similarity between partner and Ideal Self (IS) on attraction. Their findings were that “attraction to a partner increased and then decreased as the partner became more similar to and then surpassed the participant's IS.” This demonstrates that this attraction to similarity refers to not only type of personality, but the degree of the personality type/trait as well. Attraction is at its peak when the two personalities are the most similar in this situation. The study done by Senn also looks into similarity but from the perspective of performing tasks. The findings showed that there was a greater attraction when the task performed was similar among groups, and it decreased when the task was dissimilar. If the participants saw that someone else was performing a similar task, they were more likely to be attracted to that person. The relationships between similarity and attraction can be explored from this perspective.

Physical attractiveness is one distinct aspect of romantic attraction. The studies done by Park and Lennon (October, 2008) piqued my interest to research and test the personalities and beliefs of my subjects and find out if these play a role in the type of relationship that
then develops between two individuals. The method of the study that they conducted also
gave me some ideas as to the procedure that I might use in my experiment. The study
presented subjects with pictures of individuals that they rated on personal characteristics,
and then the subjects did the same for themselves. They found that physical attraction
consistently had a significant effect on attraction among individuals among the three
attraction conditions. Although I will not be assessing physical attraction in my study, it is
important to know that this can have a significant effect on attraction.

The study done by Luo and Zhang also gives me insight in a couple of ways into my other
topics of interest. Their findings regarding the effects of similarity on attraction were that
there were no statistical significance among the correlations between similarity and
amount of attraction studied. Their findings about correlations between self characteristics
and attraction and those between partner characteristics and attraction show the aspects
of attraction from each side separately, could give me insight into each side of attraction,
and may qualify the data that is found regarding attraction based on similarity versus
complementarity. This study, like the first one mentioned above, uses a speed-dating
approach to study attraction. This also provides some insight into the initial attraction that
happens between two individuals and what factors may be at work behind it. It also
indicates that maybe similarity between personalities does not play as much of a role in
attraction in the beginning stages of a relationship.

**Complementarity**

In the study done by Dryer and Horowitz (March, 1997), the effects of similarities and
complementarities on interpersonal attraction are directly compared. This is conceptually
more directly related to my study and provides some data that is very relevant to my question. They found that there was more satisfaction among complementary partners with regard to dominance/submissiveness. Also, very interestingly, in both this study and that of Luo and Zhang, participants perceived their partners as similar to themselves. I can look at these types of personality similarities and complementarities in my study and research, and it gives me some more in-depth information as to some possible reasoning for why similarities and/or complementarities in personality lead to more or less attraction and which specific traits can be similar or complementary to help to foster a relationship.

This study done by Hoffman (1958) uses a method that could be very beneficial to research and possibly further the procedure of my own experiment. “Groups composed of similar personalities and groups composed of dissimilar personalities were formed according to the interrelations among certain measures of their personalities.” It demonstrates a way to measure personality and values in the process of measuring interpersonal attraction, which is separate from and just as important as measuring physical attraction. The hypothesis that similarity of personality leads to attraction was not supported. Limitations of this study include conclusions about cause and effect. This is a correlational study, which does not hold very much internal validity.

When looking for a relationship, according to Zuo and Gao, Singh, Senn, and Dryer and Horowitz, people tend to look for similarities and complementarities in other people, depending on their own preferences. Both similarities and complementarities in personality/values and physical appearance play large roles in interpersonal attraction
between two individuals. Through this experiment, I would like to look more into the specific effects of similarities and complementarities on relationships as well as the strengths of them. I would then like to compare these strengths to see if one has more of an effect than the other. After this, I would like to compare the results across stages of relationships to see if one is more prevalent within one stage of relationships. These articles help to guide my thinking and reasoning as I research the different aspects of relationships that play roles in interpersonal attraction. As I conduct my study, each of the topics and ideas that have been presented will be considered and incorporated into my study.

Method

Participants:

Through the email directory, I will randomly select Hanover College students to receive an email that contains. There will be a total of 50 participants for this study. The age will be between 18 and 22 years of age, and the gender and ethnicity will vary randomly.

Materials:

I created two questionnaires that both ask participants questions similar to the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (Myers & Briggs Foundation) inventory questions. These questions will ask about personalities and values that they find attractive in a partner as well as questions about themselves. Both questionnaires will ask participants questions regarding their own personalities. With the hypothetical
partner, one questionnaire will ask how willing the subject would be to go on a first date with someone who has certain characteristics (which are linked to the different personality types. The second questionnaire will ask the subject how willing he/she would be to be in a serious relationship with a person who has these attributes.

**Procedure:**

First, I will randomly select Hanover students to receive the email. They will give informed consent to take the questionnaire. Then, they will take one of two questionnaires that I have randomly assigned. Each participant will fill out one survey; some individuals will receive one survey and some will receive the other. In the email, I will not tell them that I am measuring the effects of similarities/complementarities on interpersonal attraction. They will fill out the questionnaire. They also received a debriefing form upon completion of the questionnaire.

**Results**

I gathered the answers from participants and ran a correlation test between the answers for self and those about a hypothetical partner. **Figure 1.** shows that the mean for the correlation between these two types of questions in the long-term condition was about 0.35, and the mean for the correlation in the short-term condition was about 0.1. **Figure 1.** also shows the 95% confidence intervals for these two conditions. The confidence interval for the long-term condition is shorter than the confidence interval for the short-term condition, indicating that the data is more concentrated around the mean. It is also higher up on the graph than the latter, which indicates more of a positive correlation pattern. The confidence interval for the short-term condition is longer, which indicates that the data was more dispersed.
Discussion

My question relating to long- and short-term relationships asked if personality types among these two conditions tend to be more similar or opposite. Looking at the results, with serious (long-term) relationships, people tend to look more for similar personalities in their hypothetical partners than complementary personalities, although there is not a strong correlation. With a first date (short-term relationships), people tend to be more willing to date a person who is not as similar in personality to
him-/herself as in the long-term relationship. The confidence interval for the long-term condition indicates that because people are more serious about their relationships, they tend to “know what they want.” The confidence interval for the short-term condition indicates that people are more open to different types of personalities and do not narrow the possibilities down to only personalities that are similar to their own.

Limitations to my study include the population from which I drew my results. I would have liked to gain this type of information from more age groups, a population outside of college, and from a more ethnically diverse population. Another limitation is the lack of the physical attractiveness aspect. This would be another way to study attraction that I would like to further investigate. There were also only a few questions to assess each personality area on the questionnaire. I think that I would have had a more accurate representation of an individual’s personality if I had more questions.

The importance of this study to our lives includes relationships in general. They play a large role in our lives, and we can have a better idea of what to expect and what to look for if we have the information presented in this study. We can also see that it is human nature to be open at first with regard to personality of a partner, and then we tend to look for similarity within our partners. In further research, I would like to learn more about this and look into familiarity as a possible cause. I would also like to know the different views that people hold on different stages of relationships and the ideas that people have about how they should be approached. These would present different and interesting dimensions to my study.
References


