

# Psychology Factsheets



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## Psychological theories of attraction

This Factsheet reviews the three main psychological theories of attraction and describes a selection of the relevant research. Guidance is given on writing effective examination answers about interpersonal attraction and the terms in bold are explained in the glossary. You will also be able to test your knowledge in exam style questions.

The examiner will expect you to be able to:

1. Explain what is meant by attraction and identify some variables associated with it.
2. Describe key theories of attraction and identify strengths and weaknesses of theories.
3. Support your answers with reference to research studies.

### What is interpersonal attraction and why is it important?

Interpersonal attraction is the force that draws one person to another. It is the subjective perception of the qualities in another person that motivate a wish to interact with him or her. Attraction is an important as well as an interesting topic because it marks the starting point for all romantic relationships and friendships.

These relationships are important for mental health because they meet the basic human need for **affiliation** and provide protection against the negative effects of **social isolation**, such as feeling lonely and worthless.

This Factsheet looks at three theories of interpersonal attraction: the Reinforcement-Affect Model, Social Exchange Theory and the Evolutionary approach.

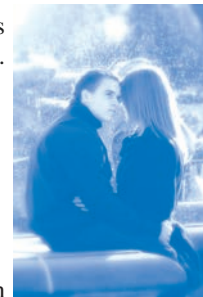
### 1. The Reinforcement-Affect Model (Byrne & Clore 1970)

This approach is based on ideas from the theory of **classical conditioning**. This says that when we experience a rewarding event our emotional state can become linked to a specific feature of the environment. In the jargon of conditioning, the feature becomes a **stimulus** and the feelings are a **response** to that stimulus. The effect of the rewarding event, or **reinforcement**, is to make the response likely to occur when the stimulus is present. Because receiving a reward is pleasant, the associated feelings are also likely to be pleasant. The result is that we experience positive feelings towards people who are linked in some way to a rewarding event. For example if someone tells us that they think we are extremely intelligent (a rewarding event) we feel good about ourselves (the response) and that person subsequently acts as a stimulus for the good feelings.

Consequently, whenever we see that person, the good feelings return, we want to see more of them and become attracted to them. As long as we receive positive reinforcements such as praise, attention, or admiration we will continue to be attracted to the person(s) concerned and will strive to develop a relationship with them in order to continue to receive the reinforcement and obtain pleasant feelings. Mutual attraction is simply explained in the theory by the assuming that each person finds the other rewarding.

Being around people who obviously like us is rewarding and we are attracted to them in return.

**Exam Hint:-** Your answer must have a clear description of what the theory says about why attraction occurs and, if possible, you should try to include an example.



Reward theory is able to explain research findings such as those concerning **reciprocity** in interpersonal attraction. Dittes & Kelley (1956) found that members of discussion groups who believed that the other group members liked them were more attracted to those people than to those they believed to be neutral or hostile. The reciprocity effect was also demonstrated in experiments by Lewicki (1985) which showed that the while a rewarding interaction increases attractiveness an unrewarding one has the opposite effect. In the first experiment the student participants were shown photographs of two women (designated A and B) and asked which appeared to be the more friendly of the two. Opinions were equally divided between the two pictures. Other participants interacted with a warm and friendly female experimenter who appeared similar to the woman in Photo A before viewing the photos. These participants were about 6 times more likely to say that the woman in Photo A was friendlier and more attractive than the one in Photo B. In a follow-up study, the experimenter behaved in an unfriendly manner towards half of the participants and in a friendly way towards the other half. They were later required to meet one of the women in the photos and almost all of who had been exposed to the “unfriendly” experimenter avoided the one who resembled her.

**Exam Hint:-** Make sure you can support your description of a theory with a brief but clear account of relevant supporting research.

### Some strengths and limitations of reward theory

The Reinforcement-Affect model explains both mutual and individual attraction in terms of the conditioning process, which is well understood and has been researched for many years. Moreover, because conditioning theory deals with emotional responses that are not under conscious control it is able to account for the fact that one can be attracted to someone without knowing why. However, in theories of conditioning the definition of what can operate as a reward can vary from person to person. This means that we cannot predict whether an attraction will form in any particular situation.

**Examiner comment:** You must take care not to confuse classical conditioning with operant conditioning when discussing the Reinforcement-Affect model.

### 2. Social Exchange Theory

This theory sees relationships as forming a kind of market place in which we go looking for the best deal that we can find. It suggests that whether we pursue or withdraw, following an initial attraction, is influenced by our assessment of the potential rewards and costs.

Rewards in this context are the positive qualities that can make a relationship worthwhile and enjoyable, such as companionship, shared interests, emotional closeness and support, even envy of friends. Costs can be anything in a relationship that can cause negative feelings, such as a partner who has a loud voice, odd personal habits, or who is unreliable or unfaithful. According to the theory, we tend to pursue a “**minimax**” strategy in forming relationships. That is, we usually try to obtain the maximum level of reward while at the same time minimizing any potential costs. When we have several possibilities to choose from, adopting a minimax strategy can help us to decide what to do.

Rewards and costs are not necessarily all apparent at the beginning of a relationship



**Exam Hint:-** This theory seems relatively straightforward, but you should back up the basic description with examples of possible rewards and costs and be able to apply this to an unfamiliar scenario.

In this scheme, **Equity Theory** explains mutual attraction. This says that once each person in a dyad has calculated their rewards and costs and thinks the rewards are sufficient to outweigh the potential costs, then as long as each half of the dyad stands to benefit to an approximately equal degree, mutual attraction stands a good chance of developing into a relationship.

**Examiner Comment:** Care must be taken not to confuse the social exchange and equity models – although they are obviously related they offer different explanations of relationship formation.

However, human behaviour tends to be more complicated than this model suggests. Research suggests that we graduate our expectations, that is, we expect higher levels of reward if a relationship is judged to be potentially high in costs. Social exchange theory also argues that our feelings of attraction are dependent on our ideas about what sort of relationships we deserve or can realistically expect (the **comparison level**). Thus we may avoid expressing attraction towards someone we judge to be from a higher social class than ourselves because we think it would be unrealistic to expect them to be interested in us. We also include a judgement about the likelihood of finding a better relationship with someone else (the **comparison level for alternatives**) in our calculations. The less likely it is that we will find someone else, the more content we will be with a lower level of reward and a higher level of cost.

*A shared interest in wearing historical costumes can be very rewarding.*



Social Exchange Theory can explain much of the research evidence about the role of **proximity** and **similarity**. Festinger et al. (1950) tracked friendship formation among couples in university residences and found that the closer together people lived, even within a building, the more likely they were to become close friends. This can be explained by the fact that proximity reduces one of the possible costs to a relationship, namely the need to spend time looking for someone that you might find attractive.

Similarity is also rewarding and therefore functions as an attractant because it promises a relationship with fewer costs (such as disagreements) than might be the case if couples were less similar. It has been found for example that attraction correlates highly to personality similarity. Specifically, people look for romantic partners who are similar to themselves on such factors as agreeableness, conscientiousness, extroversion, emotional stability, and openness to experience, (Botwin et al. 1997). Similarity also promotes relationship commitment. A study of heterosexual dating couples found that similarity of values was linked to relationship commitment and stability (Kurdek & Schnopp-Wyatt, 1997).

**Exam Hint:-** Good answers give examples (and any necessary explanation) of what might constitute costs and benefits in a relationship.

### Some strengths and limitations of social exchange theory

Possibly, social exchange theory is more realistic than reward theory since it includes the idea that there are costs as well as rewards in all relationships. On the other hand, it implies that we are all “rational perceivers” who total up the possible rewards, subtract the likely costs and act on the result. Relationship formation is probably much less rational and more subject to purely emotional influences than this model suggests.

### 3. The Evolutionary Approach

In the case of interpersonal attraction, evolutionary psychology takes the view that the biological purpose of attraction is reproduction. It therefore argues that interpersonal attraction is driven by the **human genome** rather than by learning as in the reinforcement-affect model or by rational calculation as in social exchange theory. Consequently, people will be attracted to potential partners who appear to be fertile with the potential to produce healthy offspring.

**Exam Hint:-** you should focus on the elements of evolutionary theory that are specifically relevant to attraction and resist the temptation to write all that you know about evolution.

Regan and Berscheid (1997) found that both sexes rated physical attractiveness as the most important characteristic in assessing the desirability of another person as a romantic partner. Dunbar and Waynforth examined 900 US lonely-hearts advertisements from four newspapers. They found that women were more likely to advertise themselves as youthful and physically attractive while males tended to highlight their economic status. From an evolutionary perspective this is because the sexes have different priorities in mate selection that reflect their different contributions to the production and rearing of children.

*This actress possesses all the signs of health and fertility that make her attractive to men.*



In evolutionary terms, what counts most towards attractiveness are the signs of health and fertility. Research has found that women tend to be more attracted to men who have the indicators for good

testosterone levels such as height, narrow waist, broad shoulders and masculine facial features such as a broad forehead, prominent chin and brow and well-defined cheekbones, (Schacht, 2005). It has also been found that women are looking for ability to contribute to the successful raising of any offspring.

They therefore show a preference for men who will be strong and supportive and who are able to show social and economic advantages, such as having a good job with a steady income. 'Kind' and humorous, men are more attractive, possibly because these are clues to an individual who will form a strong relationship bond and will be able to cope with the demands of child-rearing, (Buss, 1989). Men on the other hand are more interested in women who possess the characteristics associated with health and youth and reproductive capacity such as having a slim waist, good teeth, a clear unwrinkled skin and the classic "hourglass figure". Facial symmetry is an indicator of "good genes" in both sexes, so they are also attracted by that and by "juvenile features" including full lips, a high forehead, broad face, small chin, small nose, short and narrow jaw, high cheekbones, and wide-set eyes. Long hair, and clear smooth skin, are also preferred, (Cunningham et al., 1990).

There is agreement among different cultures about what constitutes female attractiveness and this strengthens the argument that interpersonal attraction is guided by the human genome. For example, Singh (1993) has shown that, across different cultures, men prefer women whose waists are about 7/10 of the circumference of their hips. He suggests that this is because a small waist is associated with high levels of oestrogen and low levels of testosterone, both of which are linked to high fertility. A woman with a small waist is also unlikely to already have experienced childbirth or to be pregnant. Both these factors are likely to render a woman much less attractive.

### Some strengths and limitations of this approach

This approach ties interpersonal attraction firmly to the reproductive function of conjugal relationships. This is both a strength and a limitation because while attraction is the first step in finding a mate and producing a family for some people, this approach ignores the fact that relationships have other functions, such as mutual support and companionship. Nor, does it adequately explain how or why some sex couples are attracted to each other or why people who do not wish to have children nevertheless experience interpersonal attraction.

*Good testosterone, but what about his parenting potential?*



### Summary

The three theories reviewed offer quite different fundamental explanations for interpersonal attraction. Reward theory suggests that attraction occurs because a form of conditioning takes place; social exchange theory sees attraction as the outcome of a rational process of balancing potential rewards and costs and the evolutionary approach places ultimate responsibility on the process of evolution in which genetic factors are assumed to play a major role.

### Glossary:

**Affiliation:** Relationships based on an emotional bond e.g. friendships and romantic relationships.

**Classical conditioning:** The form of learning in which an associative bond is formed between a feature in the environment and a response to it.

**Comparison-level:** The expectations we have of a relationship in the light of previous experience based on weighing the potential rewards and costs.

**Comparison-level for alternatives:** Our expectations for a relationship, taking into account any possible alternatives.

**Equity Theory:** The idea that stable relationships are formed when both individuals receive approximately equal benefits and incur approximately equal costs.

**Human genome:** The complete set of DNA for humans.

**Minimax strategy:** The approach to relationships that sets out to minimise possible costs while maximising potential rewards.

**Proximity:** The nearness of one object or person to another.

**Reciprocity:** Mutual exchange.

**Reinforcement:** Event that increases the likelihood that a response will occur to a given stimulus.

**Response:** Behaviour that is evoked by a stimulus

**Similarity:** In attraction, such things as shared interests or beliefs or levels of attractiveness.

**Social isolation:** Living without any significant contact with other people.

**Stimulus:** A feature that, through learning, becomes capable of evoking a response.

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### Worksheet: Psychological theories of attraction

Name \_\_\_\_\_

1. Write a brief explanation of the Reward Theory of interpersonal attraction. Include the terms *stimulus*, *response* and *reinforcement* in your answer.

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2. Give a brief account of how Social Exchange Theory explains interpersonal attraction. Give two examples of how *rewards* and *costs* may influence attraction.

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3. Evolutionary theory takes the view that interpersonal attraction has a biological function. Explain why men and women seem to differ about which features of the opposite sex they find attractive

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4. How would each of the theories of attraction explain the following scenarios.

(a) John sees Maggie for the first time on a bus and is instantly attracted by her striking red hair, milky skin and film star teeth

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(b) Sonia goes to college to get her exam results which turn out to be unexpectedly good. The guy behind her in the queue is a stranger from another college who has also done well. They have never met before, but they start chatting and arrange to meet later for a drink.

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(c) Wladek finds it difficult to deal with extravert people. At a party he is attracted to Selma and tries engage her in a serious conversation. Very quickly he realises that that she talks extremely loudly and is quite abrasive in voicing her opinions so he makes an excuse and leaves.

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(d) Norah, who was at the same party, had spent the afternoon at a spa having her hair, nails and skin pampered and buying a new dress that she knows flatters her figure. She is gratified to find herself receiving lots of requests to dance from male guests and hooks up with Simon.

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5. Salman is puzzled by the fact that it is not unusual to find young and attractive women going out with older but less attractive men.

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