

# Psychology Factsheets



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## Interpersonal attraction & formation of relationships

This Factsheet summarises:

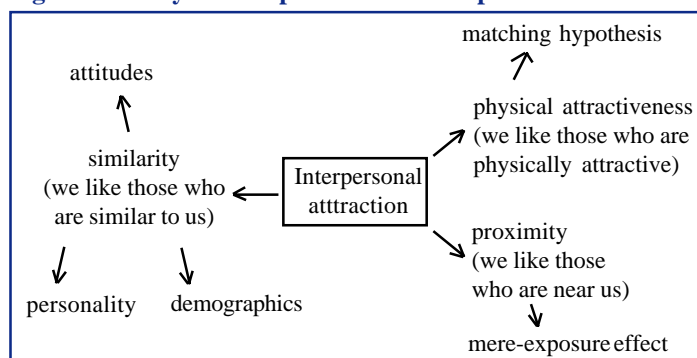
- the definition of attraction;
- explanations and research studies about interpersonal attraction;
- theories and research studies relating to interpersonal attraction and the formation of relationships.

### Introduction

- **What is interpersonal attraction?** Interpersonal attraction refers to the characteristics and processes that draw people together, either as friendship or as romantic love.
- **Fate, your star sign, or something else?** What determines whom you will like or even marry? What leads you to become friends with one person? Psychologists try to answer such questions when studying interpersonal attraction. They have found several factors that explain interpersonal attraction; *proximity*, *physical attractiveness* and *similarity*. Psychologists incorporate these factors into theories of interpersonal attraction and the formation of relationships.

### Explanations of interpersonal attraction

Fig 1: Summary of the explanations of interpersonal attraction



### Proximity

**Proximity** is where the closer people live to each other, the more likely they are to interact and to like each other. The 'mere-exposure effect' (Zajonc, 1968) describes the tendency for people to develop more positive feelings towards stimuli that they are repeatedly exposed to (advertisers rely on this!).

### Evaluation:

- Evidence supports proximity as a factor in interpersonal attraction. Festinger, Schachter and Back (1950) conducted the Westgate Apartment study that examined the effect of proximity on friendship. They randomly assigned married students to live in flats in two-storey buildings. It was found that:
  - about 66% of closest friends lived in the same building
  - 44% were most friendly with their next-door neighbours
  - 22% were friendly with those two doors away
  - only 10% had their best friend down the hall
- Students rated a woman who attended lectures often as more likeable than a woman who attended only occasionally (Moreland and Beach, 1992).
- Nahemow and Lawton (1975) found that 93% of inner-city residents had their best friend in the same building.

- Proximity is not only important for positive feelings. Most of the enemies of residents in Californian apartment blocks live close by (Ebbesen, Kjos and Konecni, 1976). The mere-exposure effect supports this; if the initial reaction to a person is negative, frequent exposure can increase negative feelings towards them (Swap, 1977).

### Physical attractiveness

**Physical attractiveness** influences our feelings and attitudes about a person's character. People tend to agree about what is attractive. For example, we find childlike faces attractive in women (i.e., big eyes, small nose and chin). We credit physically attractive people for more than their beauty (the **halo effect**; Dion, 1972). For example, males and females state that physically attractive people are also poised, happy, etc.

One explanation of attraction is the **matching hypothesis**. It proposes that we are not attracted to the most physically attractive person but to the person who matches us in terms of attractiveness. We do so to keep a balance and/or because a more attractive person might reject our advances. The matching hypothesis has been developed to include the idea that people can match not just on physical attractiveness but also on other attributes (e.g., intelligence). For example, a less attractive, but wealthy, man can complement an attractive woman.

### Evaluation:

Walster et al. found evidence, in the 'Computer Dating Program' (see box), that did not support the matching hypothesis. They found that people picked individuals more attractive than themselves.

### 'Computer Dating Program'

Walster, Abrahams and Rottman (1966) set up a 'computer dance' for university students. They assessed students for physical attractiveness when they signed up for the dance. The students then filled out a questionnaire that measured personality traits. The students thought that the questionnaires would be used to match them to a partner at the dance. They were actually randomly paired with a partner. The students were asked to rate their partner during the dance. Physically attractive individuals were liked more by their partners than less attractive individuals. This study therefore does not support the matching hypothesis.

- Walster and Walster (1969) found support for the matching hypothesis. They repeated the 'computer dating program' but with students who had met beforehand. This time students expressed most liking for those at the same level of attractiveness.
- A study of photographs of engaged and dating couples showed a tendency for the two people to be similar in terms of physical attractiveness (Murstein, 1972).
- The 'computer dating program' is criticised for being an artificial test because the partners could not choose each other. Also, the students rated their partners mid-dance before any rejection could have occurred.
- Some people view physical attractiveness as more important than others do. Towhey (1979) found that people who scored higher on the **Macho Scale** were more influenced by physical attractiveness than low scorers were.

## Similarity

### Basic principles:

Are people attracted to people who are similar ('birds of a feather flock together') or to people who have opposite characteristics ('opposites attract')? Three kinds of similarity are considered in interpersonal attraction:

### Attitude similarity:

How similar **attitudes** are between people determines interpersonal attraction. We are likely to choose friends/lovers that have similar opinions on topics important to us.

- One experiment paired students as roommates. Some students were paired with those who shared similar attitudes, others were paired with those who had very different attitudes. It was found that the students were more likely to develop friendships with those who shared attitudes than those who did not (Newcomb, 1961).
- Byrne and colleagues found that we have negative feelings towards those not sharing our attitudes and that the higher the proportion of attitudes shared by two people, the stronger the attraction between them.
- Some research suggests that liking for leisure activities is more important for friendship than attitude similarity (Werner and Parmelee, 1979).

### Demographic similarity:

People with similar **demographic** characteristics are more likely to become friends.

- Secondary school pupils tend to be best friends with those of the same age, gender, social class, religion and ethnic background (Kandel, 1978).

### Personality similarity:

People tend to be attracted to other people who share their personality traits.

- Information about 1000 engaged couples was collected, including information about 42 personality characteristics. No evidence was found for opposite traits attracting people to others. Instead, there was similarity for 14 personality characteristics within couples (Burgess and Wallin, 1953) suggesting that personality similarity is important.
- Winch (1958) proposed that individuals choose mates with needs and personalities that are complementary rather than similar to their own. It was found that married couples who differ in personality are happier than those that are more similar. Complementary does not mean the opposite. It means that each partner supplies what the other does not have. For example, a caring person will be compatible with someone who likes getting attention.

### Evaluation:

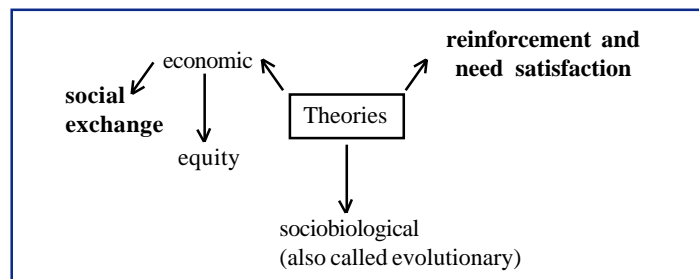
- Overall, research into similarity is supported by some research evidence but it can be criticised for being artificial (e.g. using photographs rather than a person) and for ignoring individual differences.

**Exam hint:** If an exam question asks about interpersonal attraction, do not write about the formation of relationships and vice versa.

## Theories of interpersonal attraction and the formation of relationships

Several theoretical accounts incorporate the findings about interpersonal attraction. This Factsheet covers two of these theories in detail (in bold on Fig 2); the others will be briefly summarised.

**Fig 2: Summary of theories of interpersonal attraction and the formation of relationships.**



**Exam hint:** In exam questions, you can write about both friendship and romantic relationships.

## Reinforcement (reward) and need satisfaction theory

### Basic principles:

This theory is based on the idea that we like things that make us feel good and dislike things that make us feel bad. We form relationships (friendly or romantic) with people because we receive some reward or reinforcement from them (e.g. money or approval). We associate people with good/bad experiences through **conditioning**.

### Evaluation:

- In one research study, participants were led to believe that another person liked or disliked them after a first meeting. The participants then met the person again. Participants liked the person more if they believed the person liked them than those who believed the person disliked them. This study shows that being liked leads to more liking (Curtis and Miller, 1986).
- Veitch and Griffit (1976) conducted a study that supports the idea that positive feelings increase the possibilities of interpersonal attraction (see box).
- Reinforcement theory can account for early attraction but not for attraction within an ongoing relationship.
- There is a lack of ecological validity in experiments where the participants never actually meet the other person.

### Veitch and Griffit (1976)

Individual participants waited in the experimenter's office while the experimenter went on an errand. While the experimenter was away, the participant heard either good or bad news on a radio. The experimenter returned and the participant completed a 'Feelings Scale' (measuring emotional state). They then read a questionnaire supposedly by another participant. The questionnaire was in either close agreement or disagreement with the participant's own attitudes (measured beforehand). The participant then completed the 'Interpersonal Judgement Scale' to rate the other student.

They found that (a) the participant that heard good news reported more positive feelings to the other student than those who heard bad news, (b) the 'good-news' participants were more attracted to the other student and (c) this attraction was stronger when they had similar attitudes.

### Social exchange theory

#### Basic principles:

Social exchange theory (interdependence theory) is an economic theory proposed by Thibault and Kelley (1959). It proposes that relationships are based on the exchange of rewards and costs between the partners. It is similar to reinforcement theory but assumes that we try to maximise rewards (e.g., attention) and minimise costs (e.g. helping the other person). During a relationship, the costs and rewards are established against a standard of what is expected from a relationship (by comparison with past relationships).

#### Evaluation:

- It differs from reinforcement theory because it is concerned with ongoing relationships and not just the initial interpersonal attraction.
- It can be criticised for assuming that people can objectively calculate rewards and costs in a relationship and for assuming that people are selfish in relationships.
- Murstein, MacDonald and Cerreto (1977) found that marital satisfaction is less in couples who are concerned about exchange and **equity** than in couples who are not.

### Equity theory

#### Basic principles:

This is an economic theory. It is an extension of social exchange theory but places more importance on the equity of exchange of rewards and costs. People expect to get the same out of the relationship as the other person does.

#### Evaluation:

It has the same weaknesses as social exchange theory.

### Sociobiological theories

#### Basic principles:

These theories propose that males and females need to find partners more likely to produce healthy children. We find physically healthy partners more attractive than physically unhealthy ones. Buss (1989) suggests that this is why men prefer younger women who are more likely to be fertile. Sociobiological theories also explain that close relationships exist in families because we need to protect our own genes (children have 50% of their genes from each parent).

#### Evaluation:

- Evidence that 86% of people would donate a kidney to their own child, 67% would do so for their own parents and 50% for their own sibling supports sociobiological theories (Fellner and Marshall, 1981).
- They account for the special nature of relationships in families.
- They do not explain other relationships, such as homosexual relationships or non-sexual friendships.

**Exam hint:** Essays about attraction and the formation of relationships should not include information about the breakdown of relationships or cultural differences.

### Evaluation of theories in general

- Few of the theories account for interpersonal attraction over time as people begin to get to know each other.
- The theories do not distinguish between romantic relationships or friendships of the same or opposite sex.
- They tend to ignore cultural and sub-cultural diversity.
- It is a difficult area to research because it is hard to provide a **control** for interpersonal attraction or the forming of a relationship.

### Summary of Factsheet

- Interpersonal attraction is a set of factors/processes that draws people together as friends or lovers.
- Explanations and theories of interpersonal attraction can refer to friendship or to romantic relationships or both.
- The Factsheet summarised explanations of interpersonal attraction, including proximity, attractiveness and similarity (attitudes, demographics and personality). It also described the matching hypothesis and halo effect.
- The Factsheet described and evaluated theories of interpersonal attraction, including reinforcement, social exchange, equity and sociobiological theories.

#### Glossary

**Attitude:** an evaluation of a person, object, situation or issue. A set of beliefs/emotion/behaviour directed at someone or something.

**Conditioning:** learning specific patterns of behaviour when in the presence of specific stimuli.

**Control:** the group that is not exposed to the independent variable in an experiment. The control is used for comparison with the experimental group.

**Demographic:** refers to characteristics of human populations, e.g., size, gender, social class.

**Equity:** fairness, freedom from bias or favouritism.

**Halo effect:** the tendency for one outstanding trait, such as beauty, to influence unduly the total impression of someone.

**Macho Scale:** deals with sexist attitudes, stereotypes and behaviour.

**Proximity:** nearness, how close people are to each other, also known as propinquity.

### Example exam question

1. (a) Describe findings from research studies into interpersonal attraction.  
(b) Evaluate these studies with reference to theories of interpersonal attraction and relationship formation.

#### Answer guidelines

'Describe' means writing in more detail than 'outline' would need. When describing the studies remember to include aims, procedures, findings and conclusions. For this question, you could write about studies in proximity (e.g., the Westgate Apartment study) and physical attractiveness (e.g., the 'computer dating program'). Do not include any evaluation of the studies in part (a).

'Evaluate' means to discuss evidence that supports and criticises the studies. For example, social exchange theory assumes that people are selfish in relationships but does account for family relationships. In addition, you can evaluate some studies in terms of ecological validity. This question requires you to relate the studies to the theories. You could write about, for example, how physical attractiveness is involved in sociobiological theories.

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## Worksheet: Interpersonal attraction and the formation of relationships

Name \_\_\_\_\_

1. What are some of the key factors that determine interpersonal attraction?

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2. "People are attracted to those who are opposite to themselves". Is this true or false? Explain why.

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3. Explain the following items:

(a) halo effect: .....

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(b) mere-exposure: .....

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(c) matching hypothesis: .....

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4. What does reinforcement theory propose?

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5. Describe the basic principles of social exchange theory.

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6. Give a strength and a criticism of social exchange theory.

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7. Describe one other theory of interpersonal attraction.

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