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YOU VALIDATE ME, YOU LIKE ME, YOU'RE FUN, YOU EXPAND ME: "I'M YOURS!"

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ABSTRACT

The proposition that similarity breeds attraction has received longstanding theoretical and empirical support. Still, the processes that guide this effect remain relatively unexamined. In this study, with a large sample of college students, we tested four variables proposed in prior literature to theoretically account for the similarity-liking link: consensual validation, certainty of being liked, enjoyment of the interaction, and self-expansion. Similarity was correlated positively with all four mediator variables; likewise, all four mediators individually predicted liking in addition to uniquely carrying the indirect effect between similarity and liking. These results provide insight into the processes behind the similarity-liking link.

INTRODUCTION

Similarity has long been identified as an important factor that leads to attraction and satisfaction in relationships (e.g., Byrne 1971; McPherson, Smith-Lovin, and Cook 2001). The importance of this factor is further exemplified by the finding that people perceive greater similarity with a partner than may actually exist, suggesting a bi-directional relationship between perceived similarity and attraction (Morry, Kito, and Ortiz 2010). Scholars have proposed an array of explanations for the association between similarity and attraction (e.g., Bradbury and Karney 2010; Fehr 2008; Montoya, Horton, and Kirchner 2008). The most common of these explanations are: (1) Being with a similar other is consensually validating; (2) People assume

someone similar will like them; (3) Interacting with a similar other is enjoyable; and (4) People come to like others who are a source of self-expansion opportunities. All four of these mechanisms of attraction are cognitive or affective states likely to be enhanced by similarity. Below, we discuss each of these factors proposed to mediate the effect of similarity (and likely other predictors) on attraction.

Consensual Validation. One explanation provided for the influence of similarity on attraction is the enhanced positive mood that results from being consensually validated. For example, Byrne (1971; Byrne and Clore 1970) theorized that similarity leads one to feel good about the self because a similar other validates the legitimacy of one's attitudes and views. According to this explanation, because people are inherently motivated to share a similar worldview with others (e.g., Echterhoff, Higgins, and Levine 2009), they seek consensual validation from others (Festinger 1957). The positive reinforcement received from being consensually validated in turn leads to liking of the other.

Certainty of Being Liked. Similarity with another is also likely to lead to liking through the process of enhancing the inference of being liked or being positively evaluated by the other (Aronson and Worchel 1966; Condon and Crano 1988). According to this explanation, people are attracted to similar others because they assume they will be liked by them more than by dissimilar others. The need to be liked is described as a basic human motive driving much of human behavior (Baumeister and Leary 1995).

Enjoyable Interactions. Another explanation offered for the effect of similarity on attraction is that interaction with a similar other is enjoyable and fun (Burlinson and Denton 1992; Burlinson, Kunkel, and Birch 1994). According to this explanation, what some call "rewards of interaction" (e.g., Fehr 1996), people are attracted to those with whom they have (or expect to have) enjoyable interactions.

Opportunities for Self-Expansion. According to Aron and Aron's (1986; Aron, Aron, and Norman 2001) self-expansion model, people strive to expand their selves and are attracted to those others who offer opportunities for self-expansion or personal efficacy. Others can be a source of self-expansion opportunities through the resources and enhanced identities and perspectives they can offer. Interestingly, this theory predicts that sometimes dissimilarity is preferred, especially when one can be certain of being liked, because a dissimilar other may offer more opportunities to expand the self than a similar other (Aron and Aron 1986). However, as noted by Aron, Steele, Kashdan, and Perez (2006:388), "the self-expansion model also proposes a positive effect of similarity on attraction under the typical condition of friendship formation in Western cultures" because of the perception that a relationship with a similar other is more likely to develop and be successful. The underlying premise of the theory, though, is that people are attracted to those others who, regardless of their similarity, are perceived to offer opportunities for self-expansion.

Although the above explanations and others have been offered to account for the positive influence of similarity on attraction and relationship quality, surprisingly very little research has examined directly the degree to which these factors mediate (or explain) the effects of similarity on outcomes for the relationship. A few early bogus stranger experiments on the similarity-

attraction link considered one possible mediating variable. For example, Condon and Crano (1998) found that certainty of being liked mediated the similarity-attraction association (for other early examples, see Aronson and Worchel 1966; and Walster [Hatfield] and Walster 1963). More recently, Montoya and Horton (2004) found that a positive impression of the other mediated the impact of similarity on attraction, leading the researchers to develop a model where cognitive evaluations are activated by awareness of being similar to the other, and the cognitive evaluations (e.g., a positive impression) explain the effect of similarity on attraction. The experimental studies, however, have been limited to examining only one possible mediator. Surprisingly, to our knowledge, no study has simultaneously measured several theoretical processes (mediators) proposed to underlie the similarity-attraction effect. Such a test would allow us to examine the unique predictability of each process variable in accounting for the similarity-attraction link.

THE PRESENT STUDY

The purpose of this study was to examine, in the context of actual relationships, the simultaneous roles of four theoretical variables (mediators) identified in prior literature as explanations for the similarity-attraction effect: *consensual validation*, *certainty of being liked*, *enjoyable interactions*, and *self-expansion*. Our hypotheses are:

H1: Perceived similarity will be positively associated with beliefs about the degree to which the other (in a developing or close relationship) offers consensual validation, enjoyment, certainty of being liked, and self-expansion opportunities.

H2: Consensual validation, enjoyment, certainty of being liked, and self-expansion opportunities will each be positively associated with attraction.

H3: Consensual validation, enjoyment, certainty of being liked, and self-expansion opportunities will each mediate the similarity-attraction effect. Specifically, similarity will be associated with attraction, but once the mediators are controlled, this effect will become null.

METHOD

Sample and Procedure

We obtained two types of samples from a U.S. Midwest University and combined them for a total of 620 participants (63.1% females; mean age = 20.22 [$SD = 2.07$]). The first sample ($n = 373$) was obtained from college students in several social science courses. The second sample ($n = 247$) was based on a network sample obtained by students who, as part of an optional research assignment, distributed a questionnaire to a person from their network who was in the early stage of becoming attached to someone.

The questionnaire for each sample directed the participants to select a close other (e.g., romantic partner, platonic friend). The directions for Sample 2 further requested that the person be

someone with whom they were in the early stages of developing a relationship (a majority, although not all, relationships were in the first 3 months of development).

Based on the labels the participants selected to describe their relationships, 71.6% of the relationships were categorized as romantic and 28.4% were classified as platonic/friends. Of the romantic relationships, 98% were opposite-gender relationships. Of the platonic relationships, 61% were opposite-gender.

Two versions of the questionnaire were randomly distributed to the participants in Sample 1. In one version (Sample 1A, $n = 183$), the focus of the measures was on the *recall of impressions from the initial acquaintance period*. In the second version (Sample 1B, $n = 190$), the focus was on *current impressions* during their present, more developed relationship stage. The participants in Sample 2 completed the questionnaire about the current stage of their developing relationship.

Measures

Perceived Similarity

The participants were asked to indicate how similar (1 = *not at all*, 2 = *somewhat*, 3 = *extremely*) they were to their close other on four dimensions: attitudes and values, interests and leisure activities, social skills/interaction styles, and background characteristics. In the mediation analyses below, we also used an aggregate of these four items as a composite similarity measure, $\alpha = .59$.

Attraction/Positive Feelings

To measure attraction (or positive feelings) toward the other, several items were included that refer to feelings for the other (respect, liking, attachment) and behavioral intentions (e.g., desire to spend time with the person). The items refer to a positive orientation toward the other. Participants were asked to respond to the items either as recalled for the early acquaintance period (Sample 1A) or currently (Sample 1B and Sample 2). Each item was followed by a response scale that ranged from 1 (*not at all*) to 7 (*a great deal*). The coefficient alpha for the 9-item attraction scale was .90. The items are available in Appendix B.

Theoretical Mediators

Items were written by the first author to assess the mediating processes: *consensual validation*, *certainty of being liked*, *enjoyment*, and *expansion of self*. Based on item analyses (e.g., item-to-total correlations) with pilot data ($n = 214$), also conducted with a university sample, a few items were deleted, added, or rewritten.

Participants responded to each item on a 1 (*not at all true*) to 5 (*extremely true*) response scale. The items were either in the past tense (e.g., “When ____ and I engaged in activities together, it was always fun”) or in the present tense (e.g., “When ____ and I engage in activities together, it is always fun”), depending on which version of the questionnaire that the participants received. Cronbach’s α ranged from .72 to .83 (see Table 1). The items are included in Appendix B.

RESULTS

Similarity and the Mediating Variables

In support of H1, we found that the four types of similarity were each positively associated with all four mediator variables, with the exception that similarity in leisure interests was not associated with certainty of being liked (see Table 1).

The Mediators and Attraction to the Other

In H2, we predicted that each of the mediator variables would be associated positively with attraction for the other. As shown in Table 1, each mediator variable was correlated with attraction to approximately the same degree ($r = .42$ to $.45$). We also conducted a regression analysis in which attraction was regressed on the four mediating variables simultaneously. The four mediators explained a significant proportion of the variance in attraction, $R^2 = .31$, $F(4, 607) = 69.52$, $p < .001$; the *betas* ranged from $.13$ (self-expansion) to $.27$ (certainty of being liked); $ps < .01$.

Tests of Mediation

In H3, we predicted that similarity would have only an indirect effect on attraction, mediated by the four process variables. To test this hypothesis, we used our composite score of similarity. We tested our mediation hypothesis using Preacher and Hayes's (2004) bootstrapped mediation method in which a confidence interval (CI) of an indirect effect is computed using resamples from the data. A variable significantly mediates an effect if there is no zero in the CI. As shown in Table 2, our hypothesis was confirmed: all four process variables uniquely mediated the relation between similarity and attraction.

Further Analyses: Differences in Scores on Mediating Variables Across Samples

In additional analyses, we compared the scores for the mediator variables across the three samples. As noted above, Sample 1A participants were asked (retrospectively) about the initial stage of their relationship, Sample 1B participants were asked about the current stage of their (developed) relationship, and Sample 2 participants were asked (concurrently) about their developing relationship. For this analysis, we eliminated those from Sample 2 who indicated their relationship lasted more than 18 weeks (thus, we omitted 27 participants from this analysis). A MANOVA (with the four mediators as the collective dependent variables) revealed a significant effect of sample, Wilks' Lambda = $.93$, $F(8, 1132) = 5.21$, $p < .001$, partial eta-squared = $.02$. Post-hoc Bonferroni tests revealed two differences, both within enjoyment (partial eta-squared = $.03$). Sample 1B ($M = 4.38$, $SD = 0.63$) reported lower enjoyment scores than both Sample 1A ($M = 4.58$, $SD = 0.52$, $d = -0.35$, $p < .01$) and Sample 2 ($M = 4.55$, $SD = 0.47$, $d = -0.31$, $p < .01$).

DISCUSSION

Scholars have amassed much research in support of the contention that people find similar others more appealing than dissimilar others. Theorists have proposed various explanations of the association between similarity and attraction, including consensual validation, enjoyment, certainty of being liked, and self-expansion opportunities (e.g. Aron et al. 2006; Fehr 2008; Montoya et al. 2008). Still, relatively few studies have tested mediators of the similarity-link link, and no studies have tested these mediators simultaneously to examine their unique effects.

Using survey data from a large group of undergraduate participants, we saw that not only did similarity positively predict attraction and the four mediator variables, but each mediator variable uniquely positively predicted attraction. Importantly, each of the mediator variables uniquely mediated the similarity-attraction effect. In other words, according to our findings, similarity generally positively predicts consensual validation, enjoyment, certainty of being liked, and self-expansion, which in turn predict attraction. Interestingly, we also found that newer relationships were associated with more enjoyment than developed relationships.

The Processes Behind the Similarity-Attraction Effect

Our findings provide novel insight into why people both desire and like those who are similar to them (e.g., Montoya et al. 2008). Indeed, it may be more enjoyable for people to start a relationship with someone who is similar to them in dimensions such as attitudes and leisure activities. Likewise, similarity may offer an array of other opportunities, including certainty of being liked, which in and of itself is another strong predictor of liking. That is, people tend to like those who like them (e.g., Walster [Hatfield] and Walster 1963), and given that similarity signals certainty of being liked, as our results indicate, then similarity should indeed lead to attraction.

Another variable we had found to mediate the similarity-attraction effect was consensual validation. This finding indicates that similar others may validate one's own attitudes and values, and thus signal an affordance of attraction. People are inherently motivated to share a similar worldview as others (Echterhoff et al. 2009). Perceiving similarity may undoubtedly signal to one that the other has a similar worldview, which in turn facilitates attraction.

Finally, we hypothesized and observed that the similarity-attraction effect was mediated by self-expansion, or an opportunity to obtain novel resources and perspectives from others into the self (Aron et al. 2001). Indeed, these results extend self-expansion theory by suggesting that similarity of the selves may facilitate the self-other overlap that characterizes close relationships. It is perhaps similarity in some domains that may open the door for self-other overlap to emerge between two persons. In other words, perhaps similarity sparks a relationship, whereas self-expansion opportunities maintain the flame.

Strengths, Limitations, and Future Directions

Our research possessed considerable strength in investigating the mediators behind the similarity-attraction effect. First, we surveyed a large group of undergraduate students who

reported on one of two different types of relationships (platonic friends and romantic partners), at one of two different stages in relationships (forming and formed relationships). Furthermore, we were able to include multiple mediator variables in a single model, due in part to considerable statistical power stemming from our large sample, to demonstrate how each of our four proposed mediator variables accounts for unique variance in the effect of similarity on attraction.

In spite of the strengths of our research, there are also limitations that are important to discuss. First, our cross-sectional design did not afford opportunities to make strong causal conclusions. To overcome this limitation, researchers should use experimental methods to evoke closeness in the laboratory to examine whether this manipulation will predict not only attraction but also the four mediator variables we had analyzed, and whether the same mediation effects emerge. Likewise, we limited the survey population to college students. Although college is a time when numerous novel relationships are formed, many of which endure to post-collegiate life, it is possible that the processes behind relationship formation in older adults may differ than those in younger adults. Thus, researchers may also benefit from examining whether the processes behind the similarity-attraction effect in other age groups parallel those we found in college students in this research.

In addition, to better understand the processes behind the formation and facilitation of attraction in developing and developed relationships, researchers may benefit from using longitudinal methods. It is beneficial to further examine these associations as they change over time. Perhaps as relationships develop, some variables may become stronger or weaker in predicting attraction than others.

CONCLUSION

We may have all experienced the interpersonal “pull” that similarity may afford us when forming new relationships. Unsurprisingly, for almost five decades, researchers have consistently found similarity to be one of the strongest predictors of attraction. As our research has shown, the similarity-attraction effect may stem in part from four processes. Similarity may be attractive because it signals or contributes to consensual validation, enjoyment, certainty of being liked, and self-expansion. All four variables provide unique affordances to the formation of attraction, from simply enjoying the activities that a couple shares together, to enriching the self with new perspectives and ideas, and to sharing a similar worldview with someone. As simple as these processes may be, they aid in establishing one of the most important facets of human life: relationships with others.

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APPENDIX A: TABLES

Table 1

Descriptive Statistics and Inter-correlations Among the Variables

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
<i>Type of Similarity</i>									
1. Background Characteristics	--	.32**	.21**	.28**	.16**	.11*	.22**	.11*	.14*
2. Attitudes and Values		--	.31**	.27**	.30**	.16**	.31**	.24**	.18**
3. Social Skills/ Interaction Styles			--	.21**	.18**	.11*	.21**	.14**	.11*
4. Leisure Activities				--	.15**	.07	.24**	.11*	.12*
<i>Theoretical Mediators</i>									
5. Consensual Validation					--	.36**	.44**	.71**	.42**
6. Certainty of Being Liked						--	.41**	.42**	.43**
7. Enjoyment							--	.56**	.44**
8. Self-Expansion								--	.45**
<i>Attraction</i>									
9. Attraction									--
<i>Alpha</i>	--	--	--	--	.75	.83	.82	.72	.90
<i>M</i>	2.15	2.42	2.34	2.38	3.25	3.88	4.49	3.71	5.52
<i>SD</i>	.68	.63	.68	.60	.90	.91	.56	.76	1.23

Notes. * = $p < .01$; ** = $p < .001$. The similarity items were scored on a 1 (*not at all similar*) to 3 (*extremely similar*) response scale. The mechanisms of attraction scales ranged from 1 (*not at all true*) to 5 (*extremely true*) response scales.

Table 2

Regression Table for the Mediation Analysis

<i>Mediator</i>	Effect of IV on mediator (<i>a</i>)	Unique effect of mediator (<i>b</i>)	Indirect effect (<i>ab</i>)	BC 95% CI	
				Lower	Upper
Consensual Validation	.61 (.08)**	0.18 (0.07)*	.11 (.05)	.03	.21
Certainty of Being Liked	.33 (.08)**	0.33 (0.05) **	.11 (.03)	.06	.18
Enjoyment	.45 (.05)**	0.47 (0.10)**	.21 (.06)	.11	.34
Self-Expansion	.39 (.07)**	0.22 (0.09)*	.09 (.04)	.02	.18

Notes. * $p < .01$ ** $p < .001$. The total effect of the IV on the DV (*c* path) was $b = 0.58$, $SE = 0.11$, $p < .001$. When controlling for the mediators, the direct effect of the IV on the DV (*c'* path) was $b = 0.07$, $SE = 0.11$, $p = .53$. All coefficients reported for paths *a*, *b*, and *ab* are unstandardized slopes with the corresponding standard error of the slope in parentheses. Bias-corrected *CI*s of each indirect effect are based on 20,000 resamples. For the complete model, $R^2 = .31$, $F(5, 594) = 53.02$, $p < .001$.

APPENDIX B: MEASURES

Consensual Validation

- 1) Becoming close to _____ makes me feel good about who I am and what I believe in.
- 2) My conversations with _____ are "validating" --that is, they help to convince me that I am correct in how I approach life.
- 3) Being with _____ helps me strengthen my own belief systems.
- 4) Because of who _____ is, I feel reassured of my views of the world.

Certainty of Being Liked

- 1) _____ makes me feel important to him/her.
- 2) _____ shows me in many ways that he/she wants the relationship to be important and to last.
- 3) I feel uncertain about how _____ really feels about me. (reverse scored)
- 4) I believe that _____ likes me a lot.
- 5) I expect that _____ will always find time for me.

Enjoyment

- 1) When _____ and I engage in activities together, it is always fun.
- 2) _____ and I usually have an enjoyable time together.
- 3) I rarely have a good time with _____. (reverse scored)
- 4) It is fun to be with _____.
- 5) We often laugh together.

Self-Expansion

- 1) I see _____ as someone who can help me grow as a person.
- 2) _____ gives me opportunities to expand my talents.
- 3) Due to my relationship with _____, I am able to have new experiences.
- 4) _____ does not help me realize my full potential in areas of life most important to me. (reverse scored)
- 5) I learn something new every time I am with _____.

Attraction

- 1) How attracted are you to this person as a close, intimate friend?
- 2) How attracted are you to this person as a companion – someone to do things with?
- 3) How attached are you to this person?
- 4) How committed are you to a relationship or friendship with this person?
- 5) How much do you desire to spend more time with this person?
- 6) How much do you like this person?

- 7) How much do you respect this person?
- 8) How much do you love this person?
- 9) How sure you about your feelings about this person?

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