

## PERSONALITY AND INTERPERSONAL ATTRACTION: BASIC ASSUMPTIONS

PAUL H. WRIGHT

*University of North Dakota*

The Psalmist dares ask, "What is man that Thou art mindful of him?" Present-day social psychologists might do well to ask the same question of the subjects in their studies of interpersonal attraction. Much of the work on interpersonal attraction falls short of specifying basic premises concerning the individual's motivational disposition with respect to his fellow humans. Occasionally an author appeals for conceptual and/or methodological integration, or for a "more sophisticated approach" to this area (see e.g. 6, 17). A small but perhaps helpful clarifying step may be taken by examining the problem at the level of basic motivational assumptions.

### AFFECTIVE NEUTRALITY ASSUMPTION

It might be helpful to stress at the outset that research social psychologists are interested in *differential* interpersonal attraction, i.e. the fact that a given person is attracted to some people, but not to others. This has generally been explored in support of a need-similarity hypothesis (9, 10, 16) or a need-complementarity hypothesis (12, 14, 22, 23, 24). For the most part, these have been regarded as competing hypotheses, but the emerging view is that they are not necessarily antithetical (13).

The need-similarity hypothesis seems to have the greater support. The need-complementary hypothesis is apparently fraught with conceptual (see, e.g., 17) and methodological (see, e.g., 20) problems that stand in the way of adequate empirical testing. But the work on both these hypotheses (11, 14, 15) seems to suffer from global conceptualizations that do not permit specification of either the conditions under which personality similarity (or complementarity) should foster attraction, or the personality variables that are important in this respect. One is left wondering what, if anything, about personality similarity (or complementarity) is so crucial to attraction.

Secord and Backman (18) provide a representative, though not comprehensive, review of theories of interpersonal attraction. The review covers "cognitive balance" theories (emphasizing Newcomb's "strain toward symmetry" formulation), Secord and Backman's

congruency theory, Winch's complementary need theory, and "exchange" theories as presented in the writings of Thibaut and Kelly (21) and Homans (8). Since each of these theories, like the research orientations discussed above, is concerned with differential interpersonal attraction, each contains an explicit assumption that stresses, in one way or another, the instrumental character of a given relationship for the subjects involved. The subject will be most attracted to those who provide him with the greatest amount of some kind of personal gain, e.g., a balanced or tensionless relationship or the satisfaction of needs or motives. While this assumption is apparently sound, there is an implicit assumption here that is questionable. By stressing the instrumental and extrinsically "energized" character of specific interpersonal relationships, and by failing to make any explicit assumptions about the motivational tendencies of individuals toward people in general, these theorists apparently adopt the implicit assumption that the appropriate baseline for gauging the directional character of interpersonal relationships prior to actual contact is affective neutrality. Thus, at best, the directional tendency of a person toward others in general will be positive, and at worst, negative; but for most persons it will be neutral.

#### SOCIAL INTEREST ASSUMPTION

Current experimental social psychology is neither the only nor the first psychological subdiscipline to take an interest in interpersonal attraction. Adler (2) theorized extensively about social relationships in terms of what he considered to be an innate capacity for "social interest." Asch (3) developed his own view of social interest, taking pains to describe the intrinsic, end-in-itself affinity that people have for other people. Allport (1) wrote in a similar vein about the "affiliative desires and capacities of human beings." Sullivan (19) argued convincingly, although somewhat indirectly, for the "primary" reward character of social interaction in his treatment of loneliness. Sullivan concluded that loneliness is a less tolerable state than anxiety since even those persons who are anxious in the presence of others will be motivated to "integrate" potentially anxiety-laden interpersonal situations to escape or avoid loneliness. These theorists were not so much concerned with differential interpersonal attraction as with attraction as a ubiquitous fact of social life, and hence stressed its "primary" or "consummatory" character; people, because they are people, are interested in and attracted to other people.

The foregoing does not mean, of course, that people will always regard others as objects of pure delight and attractiveness. It is now a trite clinical observation that various socio-developmental mishaps can produce individuals who regard other people as highly threatening and anxiety-provoking. And therein lies much of the problem faced by many "disturbed" as well as normal people—despite their own negativity, other persons remain intrinsically interesting and attractive to them. Substituting for the word "women" in an old saying, one might say, "People! You can't live with 'em and you can't live without 'em." This position may be stated in more "dimensional" and less pathological-sounding terms: One may stay well within the range of "normal" behavior and describe individuals as having basic orientations to others of varying but, at the minimum, appreciable degrees of positivity, with an overlay of mild-to-intense negativity. Thus, at best the directional tendency of a given person toward others will be positive, and at worst it will be ambivalent; both neutrality and pure negativity should be extremely rare.

#### IMPLICATIONS OF THE SOCIAL INTEREST ASSUMPTION

This view of intrinsic interpersonal motivation has implications for individual social behavior that, in turn, has implications for differential interpersonal attraction. If an individual's basic interpersonal orientation falls toward the ambivalent end of the suggested ambivalent-to-positive continuum, he is presumably in the bind of wanting to enter into interpersonal relationships while at the same time being fearful or anxious about doing so. When such an individual does interact with others, he will probably tend to be cautious and somewhat defensive about his own actions, and highly discerning and sensitive to possibly unfavorable implications in the acts and comments of his fellow interactants. It is highly unlikely that such an individual would be one to whom an associate could communicate freely and unguardedly, or from whom the associate could expect favorable, rewarding responses.

Individuals with ambivalent interpersonal orientations are not likely to be attracted to one another, but are likely to be attracted to persons who are unlike themselves, i.e. who are positive toward others-in-general without the dose of negativity making for a resultant ambivalence.

And to whom will a genuinely or predominantly positive individual be attracted? Probably to those others to whom he can communicate

freely and unguardedly, and from whom he can expect favorable, rewarding responses. In other words, someone like himself.

To the degree that this view of basic directional tendencies (as opposed to the implicit assumption of neutrality) is valid, to ignore it is to introduce an element of futility into research.

#### SOME SUGGESTIVE RESEARCH

The initial impetus for the foregoing line of thought came from the following study. The investigation was concerned with sociometric choice, and differences on two personality dimensions discussed by Bennis and Shepard (5) and Bennis and Peabody (4)—“dependency” and “personalness.” These dimensions refer, respectively, to preference for (a) formal structure in social situations and (b) intimate, personal involvement in interpersonal relationships, hereafter referred to as “formality” and “intimacy.” It was assumed that subjects would be attracted to others who were similar to themselves on these two dimensions. Communication would be freer and interaction smoother if the interactants agreed upon the amount of behavioral flexibility to establish or accept, and the degree of intimacy and personal involvement to share in their relations with one another. This assumption was a minor embellishment of the more global assumption by Izard (9, 10) that personality similarity leads to interpersonal attraction because friendship depends upon the communication of positive affect, and personality similarity facilitates such communication.

#### METHOD<sup>1</sup>

*Ratings.* Thirty high school counselors, all participants in a university counseling and guidance institute, were asked to rate 4 randomly assigned fellow institute members on a person-perception questionnaire, the Interpersonal Construction Form (ICF), devised by the author.

The ICF consists of 30 items, ten of which will be found in Table 2, and the remainder referring to such characteristics as formality, intimacy, leadership, followership, value types, intro-extro-punitiveness, work attitudes, “getting personal,” and emotional steadiness. Each item is rated on a 7-point scale from “The statement applies to the target person *much less* than it applies to most other people,” to “. . . *much more* than it applies to most other people.”

In the present study where each *S* received 4 ratings, his score on each item was the mean of these ratings.

*Formality and Intimacy Indices.* From the scores on two formality and two intimacy items respective indices were derived, a formality index (FoI) and an intimacy index (InI). For each a positively and a negatively stated item were used. These were for FoI: positive Item 26, “This person is the kind who likes

<sup>1</sup>The author will gladly honor requests for further details, including copies of the instruments used and descriptions of statistical procedures.

situations that are 'socially well-structured,' where the individual's behavior is guided by a clear set of rules or formal leadership," and negative (informality) Item 3, "This person is the kind who likes situations that are 'socially flexible,' where the individual's behavior is not too closely regulated by rules or formal leadership."

The InI items were: positive Item 28, "This person is the kind who likes to establish and maintain close, congenial relationships with other people and to associate with them on an intimate, personal level," and negative (non-intimacy) Item 9, "This person is the kind who likes to establish and maintain 'business-like' relationships with other people and to associate with them on a formal, impersonal level."

For both indices the scores on the two items were combined by the formula:

$$\text{Index} = 7 + \text{score on positive item} - \text{score on negative item.}$$

Possible FoI and InI values ranged from 1 to 13, with a mean of 7.0. The actual means obtained were 6.9 and 7.6, respectively. The correlation between the FoI and InI distributions for the 30 *Ss* was negative and significant ( $r = -.57$ ).

*Sociometric choices.* Each *S* was asked to indicate the 3 members of the institute most likely and the 3 least likely to remain or become good friends of his if their period of acquaintance extended beyond the end of the institute. The experimenter augmented these sociometric data by randomly assigning to each *S* 3 of the participants whom *S* had not mentioned, and who had not mentioned him, either as a choice or a rejection. Thus there were for each *S* 3 choices, 3 rejects and 3 randomly assigned "mutual nonmentions," or simply, "randoms."

## RESULTS

Table 1 presents the differences in formality and intimacy ratings (FoI and InI) between *Ss* and their sociometric choices. Since each *S* made 3 such choices, 3 differences were obtained. These 3 differences were summed. The figures in the table are the mean of these summed differences for all the *Ss* in the category. Figures for the differences between *Ss* and their 3 rejects, and their 3 randoms, were obtained the same way.

TABLE 1. MEAN SUMMED DIFFERENCES IN FORMALITY (FoI) AND IN INTIMACY (InI) BETWEEN SUBJECTS—RATED HIGH AND RATED LOW ON THESE TRAITS, AS WELL AS THE HIGHS AND LOWS COMBINED—AND THEIR SOCIOMETRIC CHOICES, REJECTS AND RANDOM ASSIGNEES

	Mean summed differences					
	high FoI <i>Ss</i> (1)	FoI low FoI <i>Ss</i> (2)	all <i>Ss</i> (3)	high InI <i>Ss</i> (4)	InI low InI <i>Ss</i> (5)	all <i>Ss</i> (6)
choices	5.40	4.06	4.71	3.64	6.72	4.91
randoms	5.96	6.55	6.26	5.82	7.30	6.43
rejects	6.44	6.42	6.43	7.46	7.84	7.62
F	1.04	4.82**	6.69*	8.49*	.52	9.59*

\*Significant at the .01 level.

\*\*Significant at the .05 level.

Columns 3 and 6 show these differences for *Ss* as a whole. In Columns 1 and 2 the results from column 3 are broken down for *Ss* who had been rated high in formality and those who had been rated low in it. Correspondingly, columns 4 and 5 show the breakdown for column 6 according to *Ss* who had been rated high and low, respectively, on intimacy.

Columns 3 and 6 show that differences in ratings for both traits, formality and intimacy, are smallest between *Ss* and their choices, and largest between *Ss* and their rejects. Respective analyses of variance indicated that for both traits the null hypothesis can be rejected at the .01 level of confidence.

These results were gratifying. They permitted the conclusion that with regard to both traits people tend to prefer those rated more similar to themselves and to reject those rated less similar to themselves.

When the data from columns 3 and 6 were broken down according to whether the *Ss* had been rated high or low on the two traits, the picture changed. Columns 1 and 2 show that the difference in formality between the *Ss* and their choices is 5.40 for high FoI *Ss* and only 4.06 for low FoI *Ss*. This means that the highs as well as lows had a tendency to select as their choices those low in FoI. In other words low FoI *Ss* had a trend to choose associates similar to themselves, while high FoI *Ss* tended to choose associates complementary to themselves in this trait. While the *F* value for column 1 is not significant, that for column 2 is significant at the .05 level.

Columns 4 and 5 show that when *Ss* were divided into those high and those low in intimacy, both chose associates who were high in this regard. This is why the high InI *Ss* differed in intimacy only 3.64 from their choices, while low InI *Ss* differed from their choices 6.72. In other words, the selection of the former resulted in similarity, that of the latter in complementarity. The *F* value for column 4 is significant at the .01 level.

Thus, when the degree of the *Ss*' own formality preferences and intimacy preferences is controlled, the relationship between similarity and attraction on these two dimensions is found to be accidental rather than essential. The initial finding in favor of the similarity interpretation (columns 3 and 6) is apparently an artifact of gross analysis and might be explained as follows: (*a*) *Ss* tend to choose associates who are low on formality; (*b*) for half the *Ss* (the low FoI *Ss*) this is tantamount to choosing associates who are similar to themselves; (*c*) when all the similarity scores are put together in

one global analysis, the similarity effect contributed by the low FoI Ss is sufficient to "carry" the relationship in terms of statistical significance. A similar argument applies to the intimacy dimension.

These findings led to an examination of the relationship of the other ICF scores to FoI and InI. Table 2 presents ten items that were correlated significantly. We see that intimacy, an attribute making for attractiveness as a friendship choice, is positively related to other qualities which, taken together, would indicate a positive concern with and receptiveness toward social relationships. The author can think of no better expression to epitomize this clustering of attributes than "a highly developed social interest."

TABLE 2. SIGNIFICANT CORRELATIONS OF OTHER ICF ITEMS WITH PREFERENCE FOR FORMAL STRUCTURE (FoI) AND PREFERENCE FOR INTIMATE INVOLVEMENT (InI)

ICF items	FoI	InI
likes to express friendship and liking	-.58	.74
likes to express sympathy and concern	-.51	.63
is self-confident	-.53	—
has an artistic outlook or interest	-.38	.38
is serious-minded	.51	-.47
is fair and open-minded	-.41	.48
likes to be cooperative	-.49	.64
is well-mannered	-.36	—
is sociable and outgoing	-.65	.68
has an altruistic outlook	—	.56

Formality, on the other hand, is negatively correlated with all these attributes except altruism, and is, in addition, negatively correlated with self-confidence and well-manneredness. Perhaps it is not too speculative to understand a high formality individual as one who lacks confidence in his interpersonal competence, who is uncomfortable and insecure in his face-to-face relationships and who therefore prefers a high degree of structure to minimize the chance of unanticipated and possibly unmanageable developments in his interpersonal relationships. This, in turn, may best be expressed as a low degree of social interest.

#### DISCUSSION

The above findings suggest that the often hypothesized relationship between personality similarity and interpersonal attraction is a

tune that has been overplayed. Perhaps the analytic procedures commonly used in these studies (e.g. gross between-person correlations and global measures of profile similarity) have made it difficult to distinguish between fact and artifact, producing, as Cronbach puts it, "a rash of results which are interesting, statistically significant, and exasperatingly inconsistent" (7, p. 353).

Moreover, the findings suggest the feasibility of a shift in our conceptual focus in studies of interpersonal attraction. The basic question has been, "What personality attributes, relationally considered, make persons attractive to one another?" The question now becomes, "What personality attributes as such make a given person generally attractive as a friendship choice?"

The findings provide a tentative answer to the latter question: A person who is attractive as a friendship choice is one (*a*) to whom the *S* can communicate freely and unguardedly, i.e., who is open-minded, cooperative and not overly serious-minded, and (*b*) one who is a source of rewarding responses, i.e., expresses liking and interest, and is sociable and outgoing.

The person who is not particularly attractive as a friendship choice stands at the opposite pole on these social-interest attributes. But why should a high degree of formality be so closely related to this low sociality cluster? A tentative answer is suggested by these considerations: (*a*) High formality *S*s tend to be low on self-confidence, and (*b*) they are not necessarily low on the indirect and non-specific social concern reflected in an altruistic outlook. It is easy to picture the high formality *S* as one who finds direct contact with other people somewhat threatening and uncomfortable and who therefore prefers highly structured situations in order to keep his interpersonal relationships "safe." Such a person is likely to fall short of being either a freely receptive listener or a source of rewarding responses, even for a similarly oriented associate.

This brings us to the point at which the present paper begins, i.e., an examination of the assumptions underlying research in personality and interpersonal attraction. It should be emphasized that the points presented here were *stimulated* by the study reviewed, and are not in any sense considered to have been *established* by it. Studies are now in progress that will hopefully corroborate the findings of this research and extend the work along the lines suggested in the present paper.

## SUMMARY

Psychologists studying differential interpersonal attraction have implicitly assumed that people are initially neutral toward others, and have stressed the instrumental character of interpersonal relationships. Another possibility is that people are essentially attracted or ambivalent toward each other. A person with mixed directional tendencies may often be cautious, defensive and overly sensitive, and hence not particularly attractive as an associate, even to someone like himself. Conversely, someone with a generally positive outlook should be less cautious and sensitive and hence more comfortable and attractive, even to someone unlike himself. If this assumption is correct, then personality similarity (or complementarity) *per se* becomes a less crucial variable in attraction. Moreover, ignoring *Ss* basic orientations to others in studies of attraction leaves a serious source of error uncontrolled.

In the present study 30 *Ss* rated one another on various personality traits including especially preference for structured situations (formality) and intimate involvement in interpersonal relationships (intimacy). Comparing the *Ss*' formality and intimacy scores with those of their sociometric choices showed that *Ss* chose others who were low on formality and high on intimacy—regardless of similarity. Furthermore, correlations with other traits, suggest the tentative conclusion that high formality (unattractive) *Ss* are insecure in face-to-face contact and prefer highly structured situations as a means of keeping their interpersonal relationships safe and manageable, while high intimacy (attractive) *Ss* have a highly developed social interest.

## REFERENCES

1. ALLPORT, G. W. The basic psychology of love and hate. In *Personality and social encounter*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1960, Pp. 199-216.
2. ANSBACHER, H. L., & ANSBACHER, ROWENA R. (Eds.) *The Individual Psychology of Alfred Adler*. New York: Basic Books, 1956.
3. ASCH, S. *Social psychology*. New York: Prentice-Hall, 1952.
4. BENNIS, W. G., & PEABODY, D. The conceptualization of two personality orientations and sociometric choice. *J. soc. Psychol.*, 1962, 57, 203-215.
5. BENNIS, W. G., & SHEPARD, H. A. A theory of group development. *Hum. Relat.*, 1956, 9, 415-437.
6. COEHLI, G. V. A guide to literature on friendship: a selectively annotated bibliography. *Psychol. Newsletter*, 1959, 10, 365-394.
7. CRONBACH, L. J. Proposals leading to analytic treatment of social perception scores. In R. Tagiuri & L. Petrullo (Eds.), *Person perception and interpersonal behavior*. Stanford, Calif.: Stanford Univer. Press, 1958. Pp. 353-380.

8. HOMANS, G. C. *Social behavior: its elementary forms*. New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1961.
9. IZARD, C. E. Personality similarity and friendship. *J. abnorm. soc. Psychol.*, 1960, 61, 47-51.
10. IZARD, C. E. Personality similarity, positive affect and interpersonal attraction. *J. abnorm. soc. Psychol.*, 1960, 61, 484-485.
11. IZARD, C. E. Personality similarity and friendship: a follow-up study. *J. abnorm. soc. Psychol.*, 1963, 66, 598-600.
12. KERCKHOFF, A., & DAVIS, K. A. Value consensus and need complementarity in mate selection. *Amer. sociol. Rev.*, 1962, 27, 295-303.
13. LEVINGER, G. Note on need complementarity in marriage. *Psychol. Bull.*, 1964, 61, 153-157.
14. MURSTEIN, B. L. The complementary need hypothesis in newlyweds and middle-aged married couples. *J. abnorm. soc. Psychol.*, 1961, 63, 194-197.
15. REILLY, MARY ST. ANNE, COMMINS, W. D., & STEFFIC, E. C. The complementarity of personality needs in friendship choice. *J. abnorm. soc. Psychol.*, 1960, 61, 292-294.
16. ROSENFELD, H., & JACKSON, J. M. Effect of similarity of personality on interpersonal attraction. *Amer. Psychologist*, 1959, 14, 366. (Abstract)
17. ROSOW, I. Issues in the concept of need complementarity. *Sociometry*, 1957, 20, 216-253.
18. SECORD, P. F., & BACKMAN, C. W. *Social psychology*. New York: McGraw-Hill, 1964.
19. SULLIVAN, H. S. *The interpersonal theory of psychiatry*. New York: Norton, 1953.
20. THARP, R. G. Psychological patterning in marriage. *Psychol. Bull.*, 1963, 60, 97-119.
21. THIBAUT, J. W., & KELLEY, H. H. *The social psychology of groups*. New York: Wiley & Sons, 1959.
22. WINCH, R. F. Complementary needs in mate selection: a test of one kind of complementarity. *Amer. sociol. Rev.*, 1955, 20, 52-56.
23. WINCH, R. F. The theory of complementary needs in mate selection: final results on the test of the general hypothesis. *Amer. sociol. Rev.*, 1955, 20, 552-565.
24. WINCH, R. F., KTSANES, T., & KTSANES, VIRGINIA. Empirical elaboration of the theory of complementary needs in mate selection. *J. abnorm. soc. Psychol.*, 1955, 51, 508-514.