

SIMILARITY AND ATTRACTION IN CLOSE RELATIONSHIPS

ELAINE HATFIELD AND RICHARD L. RAPSON

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When we do this, it becomes clear why it is so difficult to speculate about the link between attraction and similarity. Casual to love relationships *are* powerfully impacted by similarity/dissimilarity, but the nature of the impact varies in different kinds of relationships, at different times, and it depends on the kind of similarity/dissimilarity we are exploring. Let us note some examples.

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We share interests as well. We both like classical music and string quartets, novels by David Lodge, and foreign films. We prefer to eat out. We arrange to travel to Europe, and hike around the tiny villages, whenever we can manage it. Since we spend all our free time doing those things, such similarities make life immeasurably sweeter and easier. We never have to compromise.

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Some people's *temperaments* just do not fit. One of our clients is from a small Welsh village. Her father was the Vicar. She is a little "tea-cake" of a person, literary and delicate. On a holiday in Honolulu, she was taken with a brave, macho, motorcycle rider, a rascally sort of character. They married. Years into the marriage, they find that they are suffering. In therapy, they discover that if she can arrange her life so that she spends a bit of time each day with him and spends all the rest of her time alone, writing, or playing peaceful games with her two sons, she is fine—calm, agreeable, and happy. He, of course, can't stand such a slow pace for very long. He wants action. He longs to have a house filled with parrots, dogs, grandparents, parents, children, and spare motorcycle parts. They, too, love one another and are willing to try to make almost any compromise, but one can't help but feel that it is only a question of time until she meets a quiet, introspective fellow in a creative writing class who requires from

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If you have thought about the link between attraction and similarity/dissimilarity in your life and reviewed those stories we have recounted, what might it suggest about the link between attraction and similarity/dissimilarity?

1. People must have some idea as to what *their own* attitudes, temperaments, and behaviors are if their first impressions are to be affected by perceived and actual similarity/dissimilarity.
2. People must be aware of *others'* attitudes, temperaments, and behaviors if their first impressions are to be affected by perceived and actual similarity/dissimilarity.
3. We assume that most of the time people probably do better with others who are similar attitudinally, temperamentally, and behaviorally. Such similarities probably do tend to increase the chances that a given encounter will be rewarding.

If that is true, we would expect that the more dating couples are aware of this link, or the more they have experienced the importance of similarity/dissimilarity in their own lives, the stronger will be the impact upon first impressions of perceived and actual similarity/dissimilarity.

4. We would think that the longer a relationship goes on, the more critically important similarities/dissimilarities will come to be. Once again, this is because similarities are generally rewarding; dissimilarities punishing. If, for some reason, similarity was punishing or dissimilarity rewarding (as in the case of youthful passionate love or strong sexual attraction), we would make exactly the opposite prediction. Sometimes daters can sense that, say, attitudinal similarities are critically important early on in a dating relationship. We may feel a catch of our breath, a slight pain, when a David Duke supporter begins to defend the KKK. We can guess that subsequent encounters would be equally unsettling. When he launches into his views on abortion, that cinches the matter. At other times, daters may well be intrigued by dissimilarities. The conservative Born Again Christian girl may be intrigued by the punk rocker. Friends, who see one another a few times a month, may find that even after a friendship of many years, even major dissimilarities still continue to add spice to their lives. The nun may enjoy *occasional* conversation with Mike Tyson. But friends need not see one another overmuch. However, once people get too close for too long (when couples marry, when parents and children are forced to squeeze in together in cramped quarters, when he retires and begins to spend all his time at home) the dissimilarities may begin to rub. One gets very tired of coming home to a house that is chaotic or boring (depending upon your temperament). One gets very weary of going to concerts that one doesn't like, watching soap operas or sports program on TV that one hates. At first such differences are merely slightly irritating, then they become teeth-clenchingly annoying. Eventually they may become unbearable.

Of course, in those few cases where similarity is punishing (we both hate housework or paying the bills) and dissimilarity is rewarding, we would expect time to make such punishing similarities increasingly irritating. Casual daters may be able to shrug off the fact that they are both too shy to think of anything to say to anyone at parties, that neither one of them can think of what to do tonight, that both have terrible tempers. In time, however, the costs of similarity may begin to loom larger.

5. Finally, if attitudinal, temperamental, or behavioral dissimilarities are powerfully punishing, the existence of such differences often sets into motion forces that will inevitably erode

a relationship over time. Earlier, for example, we observed that therapists would generally advise our little Welsh "tea-cake" and her biker husband to make the best of their time together. But when enough was enough, their marriage would surely do best if they spent most of their time apart, doing things they would individually find fulfilling. After having seen hundreds of clients, however, our secret suspicion is that within a decade, she will have found a fellow introverted writer with whom she enjoys being with almost all the time. He will have found a hearty dirt-biker who enjoys much that he enjoys. But there is little to be done. If they tried to spend more time together, an eruption would inevitably follow. People may try to be "mature," try to communicate, try to compromise. But if they are too different, they are probably on a sparse reinforcement schedule. In the end, such relationships generally either explode or fade away.

In the best of circumstances, relationships are difficult to maintain for a long time. Our culture is characterized by the paradox of millions who crave that lasting special love affair and the fact that precious few achieve it (Rapson, 1988). It takes many things to bring couples together and keep them there—timing, the willingness to get close and commit, the capacity to express oneself and to empathize with another, physical attraction, the issues of money, health, children, and personal circumstances (Hatfield & Rapson, 1993). Given the odds against lasting, growing relationships in an individualistic culture, one in which there are 50 ways to leave your lover, the attempt to form a durable union between two very disparate souls would seem to be, at best, a high-risk enterprise.

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If that is true, we would expect that the more dating couples are aware of this link, or the more they have experienced the importance of similarity/dissimilarity in their own lives, the stronger will be the impact upon first impressions of perceived and actual similarity/dissimilarity.

4. We would think that the longer a relationship goes on, the more critically important similarities/dissimilarities will come to be. Once again, this is because similarities are generally rewarding; dissimilarities punishing. If, for some reason, similarity was punishing or dissimilarity rewarding (as in the case of youthful passionate love or strong sexual attraction), we would make exactly the opposite prediction. Sometimes daters can sense that, say, attitudinal similarities are critically important early on in a dating relationship. We may feel a catch of our breath, a slight pain, when a David Duke supporter begins to defend the KKK. We can guess that subsequent encounters would be equally unsettling. When he launches into his views on abortion, that cinches the matter. At other times, daters may well be intrigued by dissimilarities. The conservative Born Again Christian girl may be intrigued by the punk rocker. Friends, who see one another a few times a month, may find that even after a friendship of many years, even major dissimilarities still continue to add spice to their lives. The nun may enjoy *occasional* conversation with Mike Tyson. But friends need not see one another overmuch. However, once people get too close for too long (when couples marry, when parents and children are forced to squeeze in together in cramped quarters, when he retires and begins to spend all his time at home) the dissimilarities may begin to rub. One gets very tired of coming home to a house that is chaotic or boring (depending upon your temperament). One gets very weary of going to concerts that one doesn't like, watching soap operas or sports program on TV that one hates. At first such differences are merely slightly irritating, then they become teeth-clenchingly annoying. Eventually they may become unbearable.

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SIMILARITY AND ATTRACTION IN CLOSE RELATIONSHIPS

ELAINE HATFIELD AND RICHARD L. RAPSON

Are people attracted to others who are similar to themselves? Or do they merely come to dislike those whom they discover to be markedly *dissimilar* (Rosenbaum, 1986)? Does similarity matter most *before* people get to know one another or does it come to the fore *after* long acquaintance (Cappella & Palmer, 1990; Sunnafrank, 1991)? How important is similarity anyway? Are its effects mediated by liking (Aron & Aron, 1986; Broome, 1983; Hatfield & Walster, 1963)? By communication (Cappella & Palmer, 1990; Sunnafrank, 1991)? Immersion in the research literature can make the reader dizzy. Does similarity matter? When? Why? After a day at the library, we're not quite sure what we think.

When caught up in a thicket of contending theories and confusing claims and counterclaims, it often helps to step back a moment, think of some casual encounters, some friendships, and some love affairs in one's own life, and try to orient oneself by reviewing how attraction and similarity have been linked in those prototypic examples.

When we do this, it becomes clear why it is so difficult to speculate about the link between attraction and similarity. Casual to love relationships *are* powerfully impacted by similarity/dissimilarity, but the nature of the impact varies in different kinds of relationships, at different times, and it depends on the kind of similarity/dissimilarity we are exploring. Let us note some examples.

Teenagers often have not yet formed a very distinct impression of what they or their family and friends are like. In therapy, teenage girls often have so little sense of themselves that they still believe that they could choose any personality they wish. ("Perhaps I should be a nun like Mother Teresa . . . or maybe a corporate lawyer.") When you ask a pre-teenage boy what his mother is like, he is likely to answer: "Oh my mum is just a regular mum." (When you meet this "regular mum" you are sometimes startled to discover just how "unregular" she is.) Thus, for teenagers, what often matters is: "Is he or she cute?" It sometimes means little to her when she discovers that the local football hero has attitudes, personality traits, or interests strikingly askew from her own. As people grow older and more aware of what they like and dislike, what has worked for them and what has not, they often become aware of the critical importance of compatibility. They are attuned to similarities and dissimilarities. They have learned that it is usually critically important to live with or marry someone

Elaine Hatfield is a professor of psychology at the University of Hawaii. Two of her books, A New Look at Love and Mirror, Mirror: The Importance of Looks in Everyday Life, have won the American Psychological Foundation's National Media Award. In 1989, she was awarded the University of Hawaii Regents' Senior Scientist Excellence in Research Award. Her most recent book is the Psychology of Emotions (Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich). Richard L. Rapson is a professor of history at the University of Hawaii. He has written nine books and many articles, including growing numbers on psychological history—the history of love, sex, and the emotions. He and Elaine Hatfield are also co-therapists. Their most recent book is Love, Sex, and Intimacy: Their Psychology, Biology, and History (HarperCollins).

similar to themselves on major dimensions. They have learned to identify those few instances in which dissimilarity is the key to an "easy" life.

In our own marriage, for example, we are practically clones. We both have exactly the same ideas about abortion, what kinds of European films are the most appealing, how to improve American education, and what should be done with the peace dividend. And it is lucky that we do. We care so deeply about these topics that it would be painful to love someone and know that he/she disagreed about something so intrinsic to our essence.

We share interests as well. We both like classical music and string quartets, novels by David Lodge, and foreign films. We prefer to eat out. We arrange to travel to Europe, and hike around the tiny villages, whenever we can manage it. Since we spend all our free time doing those things, such similarities make life immeasurably sweeter and easier. We never have to compromise.

Sometimes, however, we are glad about areas in which we are dissimilar. Dick is very social, Elaine is not. He can "interview" prospective friends at innumerable lunches. She can meet the favorites at dinner. He is willing to tackle all the phone calls, while she assumes the written chores. She can sit writing at the computer for hours, losing all track of time. To keep her going, he places a bowl of gruel in front of her every now and then. If one is lucky, the *potpourri* of marital similarities and occasional dissimilarities can be wildly rewarding. If not, the combination can be lethal.

We both have seen hundreds of clients in marital therapy. We often encounter perfectly delightful people who just don't fit with one another. They may long to make their marriages work, be willing to do anything humanly possible to stay together, but they are just so different that the task becomes daunting . . . if not impossible. At the same time that one is helping them find a way to make things bearable, one can look down the road and see that eventually, their marriage is likely to end in a polite yawn or in an enormous explosion. Here are three examples.

Some couples' *attitudes* are so divergent that they constantly clash. One couple, former surfing buddies, married. She has become a feminist lawyer, who wants to stay in Honolulu, the big city with the action. He is a native Hawaiian. He has discovered his roots and wants to move to Kauai to cultivate native Hawaiian plants. They love each other, but have come to despise one another's values. The prognosis is not good.

Some people's *temperaments* just do not fit. One of our clients is from a small Welsh village. Her father was the Vicar. She is a little "tea-cake" of a person, literary and delicate. On a holiday in Honolulu, she was taken with a brave, macho, motorcycle rider, a rascally sort of character. They married. Years into the marriage, they find that they are suffering. In therapy, they discover that if she can arrange her life so that she spends a bit of time each day with him and spends all the rest of her time alone, writing, or playing peaceful games with her two sons, she is fine—calm, agreeable, and happy. He, of course, can't stand such a slow pace for very long. He wants action. He longs to have a house filled with parrots, dogs, grandparents, parents, children, and spare motorcycle parts. They, too, love one another and are willing to try to make almost any compromise, but one can't help but feel that it is only a question of time until she meets a quiet, introspective fellow in a creative writing class who requires from

her no heroic compromises . . . or he meets someone on a rough bike trail who shares his love of action. It seems only a matter of time until it occurs to them how much easier would be a life with someone whose temperament better matches their own.

Couples of course find life far pleasanter if they share the same *activities*. We both like to read Vidal's *Lincoln*, or *The Mambo King Sings Songs of Love*, or *Patrimony*, or *Fierce Attachments* to one another on those nights we go out to dinner. It helps that we both like Korean, French, Italian, and Thai food. It helps that we enjoy the same films. It helps that we both love to hike around small villages in England, France, and Italy. When we were married to others whose interests were far different from our own, it was far harder.

If you have thought about the link between attraction and similarity/dissimilarity in your life and reviewed those stories we have recounted, what might it suggest about the link between attraction and similarity/dissimilarity?

1. People must have some idea as to what *their own* attitudes, temperaments, and behaviors are if their first impressions are to be affected by perceived and actual similarity/dissimilarity.
2. People must be aware of *others'* attitudes, temperaments, and behaviors if their first impressions are to be affected by perceived and actual similarity/dissimilarity.
3. We assume that most of the time people probably do better with others who are similar attitudinally, temperamentally, and behaviorally. Such similarities probably do tend to increase the chances that a given encounter will be rewarding.

If that is true, we would expect that the more dating couples are aware of this link, or the more they have experienced the importance of similarity/dissimilarity in their own lives, the stronger will be the impact upon first impressions of perceived and actual similarity/dissimilarity.

4. We would think that the longer a relationship goes on, the more critically important similarities/dissimilarities will come to be. Once again, this is because similarities are generally rewarding; dissimilarities punishing. If, for some reason, similarity is punishing or dissimilarity rewarding (as in the case of youthful passionate love or strong sexual attraction), we would make exactly the opposite prediction. Sometimes daters can sense that, say, attitudinal similarities are critically important early on in a dating relationship. We may feel a catch of our breath, a slight pain, when a David Duke supporter begins to defend the KKK. We can guess that subsequent encounters would be equally unsettling. When he launches into his views on abortion, that cinches the matter. At other times, daters may well be intrigued by dissimilarities. The conservative Born Again Christian girl may be intrigued by the punk rocker. Friends, who see one another a few times a month, may find that even after a friendship of many years, even major dissimilarities still continue to add spice to their lives. The nun may enjoy *occasional* conversation with Mike Tyson. But friends need not see one another overmuch. However, once people get too close for too long (when couples marry, when parents and children are forced to squeeze in together in cramped quarters, when he retires and begins to spend all his time at home) the dissimilarities may begin to rub. One gets very tired of coming home to a house that is chaotic or boring (depending upon your temperament). One gets very weary of going to concerts that one doesn't like, watching soap operas or sports program on TV that one hates. At first such differences are merely slightly irritating, then they become teeth-clenchingly annoying. Eventually they may become unbearable.

Of course, in those few cases where similarity is punishing (we both hate housework or paying the bills) and dissimilarity is rewarding, we would expect time to make such punishing similarities increasingly irritating. Casual daters may be able to shrug off the fact that they are both too shy to think of anything to say to anyone at parties, that neither one of them can think of what to do tonight, that both have terrible tempers. In time, however, the costs of similarity may begin to loom larger.

5. Finally, if attitudinal, temperamental, or behavioral dissimilarities are powerfully punishing, the existence of such differences often sets into motion forces that will inevitably erode

a relationship over time. Earlier, for example, we observed that therapists would generally advise our little Welsh "tea-cake" and her biker husband to make the best of their time together. But when enough was enough, their marriage would surely do best if they spent most of their time apart, doing things they would individually find fulfilling. After having seen hundreds of clients, however, our secret suspicion is that within a decade, she will have found a fellow introverted writer with whom she enjoys being with almost all the time. He will have found a hearty dirt-biker who enjoys much that he enjoys. But there is little to be done. If they tried to spend more time together, an eruption would inevitably follow. People may try to be "mature," try to communicate, try to compromise. But if they are too different, they are probably on a sparse reinforcement schedule. In the end, such relationships generally either explode or fade away.

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