

This Week's Citation Classic

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BYRNE D. Interpersonal attraction and attitude similarity
J. Abnormal Soc. Psychol. 62: 713-5, 1961.

College students examined an attitude scale purportedly filled out by an anonymous fellow student. It was found that as subject-stranger attitude similarity increased, the stranger was linked better and evaluated as being more intelligent, more knowledgeable about current events, more moral, and better adjusted. [The Science Citation Index® (SCI®) and the Social Sciences Citation Index™ (SSCI™) indicate that this paper has been cited 209 times since 1961.]

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"This relatively simple experiment turned out to be the beginning of an active research program that has stretched over almost two decades. The methodology, the procedures, and most important, the theoretical interpretation of the relationship have influenced my research as well as that of my students and numerous colleagues. Some of the research by others was designed expressly in the futile (in my opinion) attempt to disconfirm the findings and/or my interpretation of their meaning.

"The paper in question was a slender reed on which to build the ensuing empirical and theoretical structure. The conceptualization of attraction as a function of reinforcement and of similar attitudes as one class of reinforcers was provided in a 1956 paper by Theodore Newcomb that I read and was impressed by as a graduate student.¹ Then during my first year as an Assistant Professor at the University of Texas, the notion of

operationalizing those constructs in a particular way (adapted from some earlier work by Anthony Smith) and of testing the hypothesized effect experimentally was developed. The work was planned while lying painfully in bed on a Saturday morning following a long-lasting Friday evening party.

This research has undoubtedly been cited a great deal not for its intrinsic merit but primarily because it was the prototype of a great deal of subsequent work I believe that there are three major reasons that this approach to attraction proliferated. First, the methodology of the attitude similarity studies is straightforward, easy to utilize, and inexpensive. These pragmatic concerns tend, reasonably enough, to influence many behavioral scientists and their graduate students. Second, the results were powerful both in a statistical sense and in terms of the obvious emotional impact on the subjects. For those among us who are familiar with weak relationships and marginal results, a blockbuster effect is a powerful motivator to pursue a particular line of inquiry. Third, the reinforcement conceptualization (proposed several years before there was any direct confirmatory evidence) served to initiate research among that tiny band of social psychologists who find learning theory intellectually compatible and among that much larger group who find such an approach anathema.

As an illustration of the tenacity of an ideational system, it might be of interest to note that the basic constructs that were developed to explain interpersonal attraction have more recently been expanded to account for human sexual behavior and, in a final burst of grandiosity, to serve as the basis for a forthcoming theory of personality. But for that party in Texas, the psychological world might have been spared these various excesses."

Reference

1. Newcomb TM. The prediction of interpersonal attraction. *Amer. Psychol.* 11:575-86,1956.