

REJECTION AS A CONSEQUENCE OF PERCEIVED SIMILARITY¹

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48 male and 48 female Ss took part in a study of "impression formation," during which they evaluated a "partner" who was presented as either similar or dissimilar to themselves, and who was further presented as either normal or emotionally disturbed. Ss rated the partner's attractiveness, similarity to themselves, and indicated their willingness to interact with him. When the partner was believed to be normal, Ss indicated a greater desire to interact with a similar than a dissimilar partner. However, when the partner was perceived as disturbed, Ss showed greater willingness to interact with a dissimilar partner than with one who was similar to themselves.

Much research has shown that similarity between people on such dimensions as race (Byrne & Wong, 1962), religious background (Goodnow & Tagiuri, 1952), or beliefs (Byrne, 1961; Rokeach, 1960; Stein, Hardyck, & Smith, 1965) is associated with interpersonal attraction. Other studies have demonstrated that people who like each other tend to perceive one another as relatively similar on various dimensions (Fiedler, Warrington, & Blaisdell, 1952; Kogan & Tagiuri, 1958), and conversely, people who are disliked are perceived as less similar (Stein et al., 1965).

The stability and apparent generality of this association of similarity with attraction indicate the need for an understanding of those processes which underlie the relationship. There are certain elements in the explanations of this association offered by Heider (1958), Rokeach (1960), and Newcomb (1961), using "cognitive" models, and Byrne (1965), employing a "reinforcement" model. Essentially, they have assumed that the perception of a similar attribute in someone is a positive event leading to a certain amount of attraction and a desire to perceive or create more similarity—the more similarity, the greater the attraction. Byrne and Clore

(1966), for example, found a rectilinear relationship between attraction and similarity where the latter is reinforcing.

Most of the reported evidence regarding the concurrence of similarity and attraction seems to represent a special case of the more general proposition that attributes of others will be evaluated by the perceiver according to his own motives and goals (Newcomb, 1956). If the salient motives in a situation involve facilitation of communication or support for one's values and beliefs, then the perception of similarity will probably lead to a positive evaluation. However, it is also possible that the perception of similarity may occur in a context in which the salient motives make similarity relatively threatening and nonrewarding (Lerner & Becker, 1962).

One such motive may be the person's need to maintain certain important beliefs about the world in which he lives. For example, there is some evidence that people must believe there is an appropriate fit between what they do and what happens to them—their fates (Lerner, 1965). If people were not able to believe they could get what they want and avoid what they dislike by performing certain appropriate acts, they would be anxious, and, in the extreme, incapacitated. Because of the importance of this belief, the person is continually vulnerable to objective evidence that fate can be capricious and beyond one's efforts. This vulnerability becomes important in situations where the person is confronted with someone who has been seriously harmed through no apparent fault of his own—for example, someone with a severe physical or

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emotional handicap.⁴ The presence of such a person may elicit the threatening thought, "Can this also happen to me?" The person would prefer to believe that such a terrible fate can occur only to someone who has deserved it by virtue of having committed some undesirable act (Walster, 1966) or because of an inherent personal failing (Lerner & Simmons, 1966)—in any case, someone unlike himself.

If these conjectures are true, then a person will attempt to perceive someone with a handicap as different from himself and as relatively undesirable. However, what if it is made obvious to the person that he and the handicapped victim are, in fact, quite similar? To begin with, a clear prediction is that this would be more threatening to the person (his sense of security) than if the victim were essentially "different." One way to determine the presence of this threat is to allow the person to approach or avoid a victim. The prediction here would be that a similar handicapped victim is more likely to be avoided than a "different" one. This avoidance should be accompanied by attempts to derogate the victim. Following a reinforcement model, a similar victim should elicit less avoidance than a dissimilar victim, unless similarity under the above conditions is viewed as negatively reinforcing. The perception of dissimilarity in a victim should be relatively less threatening and therefore should elicit less tendency to avoid the victim.

METHOD

Subjects

Subjects were 48 undergraduate males, recruited from sociology and psychology classes at the University of Kentucky and Eastern Kentucky University, and 48 undergraduate females recruited from Centre College.⁵ The data for females were collected separately as a replication, but are presented here in combined analyses with the male data.

⁴ Many studies have demonstrated that reactions to the physically handicapped are largely negative (Goffman, 1963; Richardson, Hastorf, Goodman, & Dornbusch, 1961; Mussen & Barker, 1944). Reactions to the mentally ill are apparently even more negative (Eisdorfer & Altrocchi, 1961; Freed, 1964; Lamy, 1966; Phillips, 1963, 1964).

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Procedure

Subjects reported in pairs, although to separate rooms, for what was ostensibly a study of the ways in which people form impressions of one another. Each subject was told individually that he and his partner, who was in another room, would provide some information about themselves. The information was to be exchanged between them so that each would be able to form an impression of the other.

The experimenter left the room while the subject completed two attitude questionnaires. When the experimenter returned to collect these materials, he told the subject that the partner's questionnaires would be brought in as soon as they had been filled out. The experimenter left the room again, taking the subject's completed questionnaires, and returned a few moments later to give the subject the questionnaires supposedly completed by the other subject. These actually had been altered in order to create the impression that the partner was very much like or very different from the subject in terms of beliefs, goals, and aspirations. In addition, the subject was led to believe that his partner was either normal or emotionally disturbed.⁶ The subject then evaluated his partner on a measure of attraction.

When the subject had completed the evaluations, he was told about the second part of the experiment, which supposedly dealt with how people actually go about making impressions on others. He was given a choice of writing a brief list describing the kinds of things he says when meeting someone else for the first time, or of actually meeting his partner and talking with him for 10 or 15 minutes so that the experimenter could see how he went about making an impression. After the subject had made his choice, he was asked to indicate, on a 10-point scale, how similar he perceived the partner to be to himself. The two subjects were finally brought together and were carefully disabused.

Experimental Conditions

Partner's adjustment. The form first completed by the subject was a "Personal Data Sheet," which requested such information as age, year in school, and class from which the subject was recruited. There was also a heading entitled, "Any other information which might be relevant to your participation in this experiment." In the normal conditions, the word "None" was written in this space.

⁶ A preliminary study using 57 male subjects indicated that an emotionally disturbed (schizophrenic) stimulus person was seen as significantly less attractive than a normal stimulus person. Subjects also viewed the schizophrenic model as significantly less similar to themselves (in terms of beliefs and opinions) than the normal model. No such differences were found between the normal model and a physically handicapped (crippled) model. For this reason, an emotionally disturbed stimulus person was employed in the present study.

In the emotionally disturbed conditions, the following was written:

I don't know if this is relevant or not, but last fall I had kind of a nervous breakdown and I had to be hospitalized for a while. I've been seeing a psychiatrist ever since. As you probably noticed, I'm pretty shaky right now.

Although these sheets were purposely left with the other materials which supposedly came from the other subject, it was desired to give the impression that the sheet had been left inadvertently. This was accomplished by having the experimenter notice the personal data sheet and remove it with some apparent surprise in the course of routinely checking on the subject's progress.

Similarity. The information the partners were to exchange consisted of the Survey of Attitudes (Byrne, 1961) and an "Important Issues Questionnaire," which was devised for this research. This questionnaire contained items dealing with background experiences, aspirations for the future, and statements regarding acceptance by others. Representative items were: "How important is it to you that people other than your close friends think highly of you?" (Very important-Very unimportant); and "How important is it to you that you achieve a large measure of success in life?" (Very important-Very unimportant). The questionnaires the experimenter supposedly brought from the partner actually had been prepared by the experimenter in the following manner. To create the impression of similarity, 8 of the items of the Survey of Attitudes were checked exactly as the subject had responded, 12 others were checked within one or two alternatives of the subject's own response, but on the same side of the "no opinion" choice, and the remaining 6 were checked one choice to the opposite side of "no opinion." Much the same procedure was followed on the Important Issues Questionnaire; 3 of the 10 items were checked identically to the subject's response, 5 were one or two choices away, and 2 were three choices away. The impression of dissimilarity was created on both questionnaires by checking a choice opposite to that checked by the subject, although agreement was indicated on a few items, and on a few others only a moderate discrepancy of two choices was created because of the extreme social undesirability of the alternative opposite the one checked by the vast majority of subjects. With the above exceptions, the discrepancy between the subject's responses and those ostensibly of the partner was kept at four choices in the dissimilar manipulations.

Measures. A measure of the major variable, willingness to interact with the partner, was derived in the following manner. An "avoidance index" was made by combining the subject's choice, that is, writing a list or meeting the partner, with his response to a question dealing with how important it was for him to have a choice. This question was accompanied by a 9-point scale, the ends of which were labeled "Very important" and "Doesn't make any

TABLE 1
PERCEIVED SIMILARITY: MEANS AND ANALYSIS OF VARIANCE FOR "SIMILARITY" QUESTION*

	Normal		Disturbed	
	Male	Female	Male	Female
Similar	3.250	1.583	4.833	5.083
Dissimilar	7.083	8.333	7.333	9.333

Analysis of variance

Source	df	MS	F
Similarity (A)	1	450.667	212.458***
Handicap (B)	1	60.167	28.365***
Sex (C)	1	5.042	2.377
A × B	1	22.042	10.391**
A × C	1	10.667	5.029*
B × C	1	32.667	15.400***
A × B × C	1	2.040	<1
Within cells	88	2.121	

Note.—The lower the mean score, the greater the perceived similarity.

* $N = 12$ per cell.

** $p < .05$.

*** $p < .01$.

**** $p < .001$.

difference." Thus, the subject's preference could range from strong approach, which was scored 1 (Meet partner-Very important), to 19, or strong avoidance (Write a list-Very important).

The measure of attraction consisted of 19 highly evaluative bipolar adjectives, similar to those used in earlier research (Lerner, 1965; Lerner & Matthews, 1967; Lerner & Simmons, 1966), which contained such pairs as "interesting-dull" and "attractive-unattractive." The ratings on these 9-point scales were combined to yield an overall rating of the partner's attractiveness. Subjects also described the partner on an Interpersonal Judgment Scale which had been modified slightly from Byrne (1961) by the inclusion of two more statements: (2) "This person would find it (very easy-very difficult) to win personal affection and liking from others," and (7) "This person would (definitely-definitely not) fit in with my circle of close friends." (The numbers in parentheses refer to the position of these items in the modified scale.)

RESULTS

The "similarity" question, which had been presented orally to the subjects, provided a check on the procedure used to create the perception of similarity and dissimilarity. As Table 1 shows, the procedure worked effectively; subjects in the similar groups saw their partners as relatively similar, while those in the dissimilar groups saw their partners as relatively dissimilar. An unpredicted, but not

TABLE 2
MEANS AND ANALYSIS OF VARIANCE FOR
"ADJUSTMENT" QUESTION^a

	Normal		Disturbed	
	Male	Female	Male	Female
Similar	5.917	5.417	4.667	4.000
Dissimilar	3.917	3.667	3.333	2.833

Analysis of variance			
Source	df	MS	F
Similarity (A)	1	58.594	51.349**
Handicap (B)	1	25.010	21.917**
Sex (C)	1	5.104	4.473*
A × B	1	2.344	2.054
A × C	1	.261	<1
B × C	1	.261	<1
A × B × C	1	.010	<1
Within cells	88	1.141	

Note.—The higher the mean score, the greater the perceived adjustment.

^a N = 12 per cell.

* p < .05.

** p < .001.

entirely surprising, finding in light of the preliminary study described in Footnote 6 was that the subjects in the disturbed conditions perceived their partners as less similar to themselves, regardless of which similarity condition they were in. This is suggested by the significant handicap effect and by the signifi-

TABLE 3
AVOIDANCE INDEX: MEANS AND
ANALYSIS OF VARIANCES^a

	Normal		Disturbed	
	Male	Female	Male	Female
Similar	6.750	4.750	9.917	10.000
Dissimilar	10.167	10.167	6.583	7.750

Analysis of variance			
Source	df	MS	F
Similarity (A)	1	15.844	<1
Handicap (B)	1	8.760	<1
Sex (C)	1	.844	<1
A × B	1	311.760	11.991*
A × C	1	14.261	<1
B × C	1	15.844	<1
A × B × C	1	1.261	<1
Within cells	88	25.999	

Note.—The higher the mean score, the greater the unwillingness to interact with the partner.

^a N = 12 per cell.

* p < .001.

cant interaction between similarity and handicap. The significant interactions between these two variables and sex suggest that the females tended to be somewhat more extreme in their judgments of similarity.

To determine the extent to which the subjects actually saw their partner as emotionally disturbed, the "adjustment" question from the Interpersonal Judgment Scale was used. The analysis presented in Table 2 indicates that the partner was perceived as less adjusted in the disturbed conditions. Furthermore, the dissimilar partners were seen as less adjusted than the similar partners. Females appeared to have responded more negatively to the information regarding the partner's disturbance.

The major hypothesis of the study was concerned with the unwillingness to interact with stimulus persons who were perceived as emotionally disturbed. Table 3 shows the analysis of results for the avoidance index. None of the main effects was significant, but the predicted interaction between similarity and handicap was highly significant. As expected, with normal others, willingness to interact increased, while with disturbed others, willingness to interact decreased with simi-

TABLE 4
SUBJECTS' RATINGS OF PARTNER'S ATTRACTIVENESS
(BIPOLAR ADJECTIVE SCALE): MEANS AND
ANALYSIS OF VARIANCE^a

	Normal		Disturbed	
	Male	Female	Male	Female
Similar	129.083	123.333	112.583	105.417
Dissimilar	94.083	85.583	96.083	76.250

Analysis of variance			
Source	df	MS	F
Similarity (A)	1	21,033.760	88.561***
Handicap (B)	1	2614.594	11.008**
Sex (C)	1	2552.344	10.746**
A × B	1	1100.260	4.632*
A × C	1	356.510	1.501
B × C	1	243.844	1.027
A × B × C	1	147.510	<1
Within cells	88	237.505	

Note.—The higher the mean score, the more positive the rating of attractiveness.

^a N = 12 per cell.

* p < .05.

** p < .01.

*** p < .001.

larity. Looking just at this more interesting disturbed-other condition, for males and females, combined, the preference for dissimilar others was significant at the .06 level ($t = 1.90$, $df = 88$, two-tailed test).

Although no specific predictions were made concerning the findings for the measure of attraction, the bipolar adjectives, the most reasonable expectation is that this measure should closely parallel the findings for the avoidance index. Some support for this expectation was found, as shown by the interaction between similarity and handicap in Table 4, although the results on the attraction measure did not show the same clear interaction between similarity and disturbance as the avoidance index. The main effects of similarity, disturbance, and sex were all significant. The only remarkable finding was that females consistently rated their partners lower in attractiveness than did the males. The effects for similarity were consistent with other reports of the relationship between this variable and ratings of attractiveness. The finding that the disturbed partner was generally rated as less attractive than the normal partner is also consistent with other studies (e.g., Phillips, 1963) which show negative evaluations of people with emotional disturbances. Since the data from the other questions of the Interpersonal Judgment Scale showed essentially the same effects, they will not be presented here.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study appear to involve more than just the reflection of a social stereotype concerning the mentally ill. Subjects exhibited greater willingness to interact with other "normal" students when these others were similar to themselves than when different. However, if the other student was emotionally disturbed, the preference was reversed—greater unwillingness to interact with the similar, but disturbed, student was found. Under the latter conditions, where perception of similarity would have been punishing rather than reinforcing, the similar other is avoided. The basis of this threat, as discussed earlier, may be the person's concern for his own security. It is more difficult for someone to believe that he can avoid becoming emotionally handicapped (i.e., can control his own fate) if

he is confronted with the fact that this highly unpleasant fate has occurred to someone quite like himself. On the other hand, it is relatively comforting, or at least not particularly threatening, to believe that only people who are different from oneself in essential respects are likely to become emotionally disturbed.

Since an essentially positive relationship between similarity and attraction was found on the bipolar adjectives, which were administered before the possibility of interaction was raised with the subjects, it may be that the threatening aspects of the situation were not salient, but only became so after the subjects were asked to make their choice regarding the interaction. Similarity, then, can interact with other characteristics of the stimulus person (which then presumably become relevant to the perceiver's own motives) to produce a situation that is potentially unsatisfactory with respect to these motives.

One other finding deserves further comment. The "adjustment" question of the Interpersonal Judgment Scale appeared rather explicit in its reference to emotional adjustment. Yet the dissimilar partner was rated as less adjusted than the similar partner even in the normal conditions, where no mention was made of the partner's psychological stability. This result was also found in Byrne (1961). Evidently the negative evaluation of another person due to his dissimilarity extends even to ratings of the person's adjustment.

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