

Similarity and Social Interaction: When Similarity Fosters Implicit Behavior Toward a Stranger

NICOLAS GUÉGUEN
ANGÉLIQUE MARTIN
SÉBASTIEN MEINER
Université de Bretagne-Sud

ABSTRACT. People interact more readily with someone whom they think they have something in common with. At a pedestrian crossing, confederates asked participants for the time and, in one condition, said she/he had the same watch as the participant. The amount of time that participants lingered near a confederate was used as the dependent variable. Participants in the similarity condition spent significantly more time near the confederate than when no similarity was manipulated. The results showed that similarity fosters implicit behavior, adding to the growing body of data on the positive effects of similarity and its role in social interaction.

Keywords: attraction, impression formation, social interaction, social perception

PERCEPTIONS OF SIMILARITY RELATE to positive evaluations of similar others as well as more positive behavior toward them, even when the similarity is incidental. For example, undergraduates who believed they shared birth date, name, or fingerprint similarities with a confederate were more likely to comply with a request from the confederate (Burger, Messian, Patel, del Prado, & Anderson, 2004). Face-to-face interactions are not necessary to create higher compliance to a request. Less personal interactions, such as electronic messages addressing a request for help from a strangers receives more responses when the sender had the same name as the receptor (Guéguen, Pichot, & Le Dreff, 2005; Oates, & Wilson, 2002).

The purpose of our experiment was to test another form of independent variable used to create feelings of similarity between someone and a stranger and to

Address correspondence to Nicolas Guéguen, Université de Bretagne-Sud, LSHS, 4, Rue Jean Zay, BP 92116, Lorient 56321, France; nicolas.gueguen@univ-ubs.fr (e-mail).

test this effect on implicit behavior associated with social relation. By leading people to believe they shared a similar personal object with a stranger (a watch), we tested the effect of this “incidental” similarity on later implicit behavior (amount of time spent by the person near a similar/non similar confederate).

Method

The participants were 80 pedestrians (43 men and 37 women) aged from about 35 to 55 years, who were about to cross a street at a pedestrian crossing where there was little traffic. Confederates (1 male, 1 female, both 20 yrs) stood near the crossing. Both were blind about the experimental hypothesis. The male confederate was instructed to interact solely with male pedestrians, and the female-confederate with female pedestrians. When a participant arrived, the confederate approached and said politely: “Hello, sorry to disturb you sir/madam but I have forgotten my watch. Could please tell me what time is it?” According to a random distribution after obtaining the time, the confederate was instructed to say “Many thanks. Have a good day” (control non-similarity condition) or “Many thanks! It’s surprising but I have the same watch. Have a good day.” The confederate then moved about 2 m away and stood in front of the pedestrian crossing without any further verbal or nonverbal interaction with the participant. Then, the confederate started a chronometer and measured the time taken by the participant to cross the street.

Results and Discussion

The time taken to cross the street was used as the dependent variable. Female-participants stayed near the confederate for ($M = 1.91s$, $SD = 0.60$) in the similarity condition and ($M = 1.53s$, $SD = 0.47$) in the control, whereas male-participants lingered nearby for longer ($M = 2.54s$, $SD = 1.67$) in the similarity condition and ($M = 1.41s$, $SD = 0.63$) in the control. To account for non-normality and violation of the homogeneity of variances assumption, we employed a log transformation. With the data transformed, A 2 (participant sex) \times 2 (experimental condition) ANOVA revealed a significant main effect of similarity, $F(1, 76) = 4.95$, $p = .03$, $\eta^2 = .06$, but not of participant sex, $F(1, 76) = 0.34$, $p = .56$, $\eta^2 = .00$. Neither was the interaction effect significant, $F(1, 76) = 0.51$, $p = .47$, $\eta^2 = .01$.

These data show that similarity led participants to linger near the confederate, supporting the assumption that similarity activates a desire to create close relationships and to produce behavior related to such closeness. We created similarity by pointing out that a person shared an object with a stranger. In previous studies, similarity has been manipulated using personal attributes such as birth date, first name or fingerprints. In contrast to our experiment, these studies show an effect

of similarity that is related to explicit behavior or evaluation in which compliance to a request and judgment of liking were evaluated. In this experiment, we measured implicit behavior by calculating the time during which participants lingered near the confederate after a short interaction. It is likely that similarity led to an increased desire to create affiliation and rapport, explaining why participants in similarity group lingered near our confederates. This effect of time length seems to show that automatic social behaviors (Bargh & Chartrand, 1999) could be activated by similarity. This aspect is theoretically important because such automatic behaviors precede more controlled behaviors such as helping. However, these automatic behaviors could influence further controlled behaviors: someone staying near a person for more time (automatic behavior) could have more probability to help this person (controlled behavior).

AUTHOR NOTES

Nicolas Guéguen is a Professor of social psychology at the Université de Bretagne-Sud in France. His research focuses on compliance-gaining procedures and nonverbal influence. **Angélique Martin** is an Assistant Professor of social psychology at the Université de Bretagne-Sud. Her research focuses on mimicry and similarity in social interaction. **Sébastien Meineri** is an Associate Professor of social psychology at the Université de Bretagne-Sud. His research focuses on compliance-gaining procedures.

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