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ABSTRACT

The current study was an examination of the effect of personality variables on the relationship between attitude disagreement and attraction. Attraction was measured in a neutral situation, designed to maximize any existing affective predispositions toward attitude agreement-disagreements. Subjects were placed in an ambiguous face-to-face situation in which an accomplice agreed with the subject on 7 of 14 attitude issues. The personality variables of interest were Spielberger's (1966) state-trait anxiety measures and the Marlowe-Crowne (1964) scale of social desirability. In the context of attraction toward neutral strangers, anxiety and social desirability were expected to have quite different, in fact, complementary, effects. Specifically, two hypotheses were advanced: (1) that high anxiety would be related to disliking others and enhanced recall for disagreements; and (2) that high social desirability would be associated with liking others and heightened recall for agreements, when the proportion of attitude agreements-disagreements was constant. Results supported both hypotheses. Neutral interactions elicited very different affective reactions from high anxiety and high need for approval subjects despite the fact that proportion of attitude agreements was constant. Anxiety and social desirability apparently influenced interpersonal attraction by promoting selective perception in an ambiguous social situation. (Author)

Personality Mediators of Interpersonal Attraction

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Interpersonal attraction is strongly determined by perceived similarity. However, even in studies where the effect is strongest, there are substantial amounts of unaccounted attraction variance. This suggests that typical between-group comparisons, while of obvious interest, may obscure individual differences in the effect of similarity on attraction.

Research by Steiner (1970) suggests that individuals may respond to disagreement in a variety of ways, and that dislike for the disagreeing stranger is not unalterable. The quest for personality mediators of the similarity attraction effect has been disappointing. Byrne (1971) has pointed out quite convincingly that research in this area has been at best complex and confusing.

It's against this rather unhappy backdrop of numerous disappointing studies that in the present study the authors undertook an examination of the effect of personality variables on the relationship between attitude disagreement and attraction. One of the first things the literature suggested is that if personality is to have an effect than it should be in an ambiguous situation in regard to attitude agreement-disagreement. Extreme proportions of agreements and disagreements typically have an overwhelmingly strong effect that obliterates most individual differences in attraction scores. Clear evidence that a stranger agrees with them on a sizable majority of issues is apparently sufficient to elicit liking for the stranger among most subjects. In situations where there was no preponderance of agreement or disagreement, however, personality attributes and their concomitant selective perceptions might play a greater role in interpersonal attraction.

The research examines two personality variables namely Spielberger's (1966) state-trait anxiety measures and the Marlowe-Crowne (1964) scale of social desirability. These variables were selected for two reasons: first, both of the scales have been heavily researched in relation to social behavior, and secondly, the

theories underlying the need for approval and anxiety measures have clear empirical implications for subject responses to interpersonal disagreements.

Both anxiety and social desirability are related to selective perceptions in interpersonal situations. Spielberger (1966) describes anxiety as a predisposition to perceive a wide range of nondangerous circumstances as threatening. In an essentially neutral interpersonal relationship subjects with high anxiety may perceive another person as threatening. High anxiety subjects should be extremely sensitive to any negative interpersonal stimuli and relatively insensitive to positive cues which do occur.

In contrast to anxiety, high need for approval (i.e., social desirability) is a predisposition to deny socially threatening stimuli. Conn and Crowne (1964) reported that approval-dependent persons used avoidant, repressive defenses against hostility and blocked threatening material from their awareness. In a neutral setting high SD subjects may perceive others positively and as non-threatening. In general, high SD subjects should be extremely sensitive to positive social stimuli and somewhat oblivious to negative social cues. Thus, in the context of attraction toward neutral strangers, anxiety and social desirability were expected to have quite different, in fact, complementary effects. Specifically, two hypotheses were advanced: (a) that high anxiety would be related to disliking others and enhanced recall for disagreements, and (b) that high social desirability would be associated with liking others and heightened recall for agreements, when the proportion of attitude agreements-disagreements was constant.

Method

Subjects

Forty female undergraduates who were enrolled in a large introductory psychology course served as subjects.

The subjects volunteered to participate in an experiment on impression formation, and in particular an investigation of the kind and amount of information people need to form accurate judgments of others.

Materials

Need for approval. Need for approval was measured by the Marlowe-Crowne Social-Desirability Scale. The M-C scale consists of 33 true-false items designed to measure social desirability without psychopathological content. The M-C scale consists of items such as, "I have never intensely disliked anyone." Overall, items are of two types: culturally acceptable but probably untrue statements, and true but undesirable statements.

Anxiety. Both state and trait anxiety scores were obtained from subjects. The state-trait anxiety scales are quite similar in content, the principal difference is the temporal focus of the instructions. The state scale asks the subject to respond as he feels "right now," while the trait scale instructions call for estimates of "on the average." Items include statements such as "I feel upset," "I feel I am about to go to pieces," and a variety of other self-descriptive comments pertaining to feelings of anxiety.

Attraction. One of the primary dependent variables was the subject's score on the Interpersonal Judgment Scale. The IJS is a six item scale two of which pertain to interpersonal attraction. Subjects are asked how well they would like the stimulus person, and whether they would enjoy working with her as a partner in an experiment. Judgments are made on a seven point scale ranging from very negative to very positive evaluations.

Procedure. Subjects came to the laboratory individually. They were instructed that the investigators were interested in the accuracy of their interpersonal judgments, and that in making this determination it was necessary to learn a bit about their own characteristics.

They were then asked to complete a couple of questionnaires before meeting the other person. In this initial phase of data collection subjects completed the social desirability and anxiety measures, then completed a 14-item attitude booklet. Items were presented in a six alternative, forced-choice format and covered a variety of issues.

After the experimenter collected the personality and attitudinal measures, a female accomplice was brought into the room. The experimenter explained that he wished to ask one person (accomplice) her attitudes on the 14 issues while the other person (subject) paid very close attention to the accomplice's responses so as to make accurate judgments about her later. With the subject's responses before him, the experimenter signaled the accomplice the appropriate verbal response on each item. The accomplice expressed attitudes that disagreed with the subject's on 7 of the 14 items. Thus, for all subjects the proportion of agreements was a constant .50. (Agreements were one position removed from the subject's original record but on the same side of, pro or con, the issue. Disagreements were three positions removed from the subject's original responses on the six point scale.) The topics of agreement were randomly distributed. After responding to the 14 items the accomplice left, and the subject filled out the Interpersonal Judgment Scale, estimated the number of issues on which she and the accomplice agreed and disagreed, and attempted to recall the topics on which agreement and disagreement occurred.

Results

The results as indicated in Table 1 supported both hypotheses. Neutral interactions elicited very different affective reactions from high anxiety and high need for approval subjects despite the fact that proportion of attitude agreements was constant.

Insert Table 1 about here

The correlations in Table 1 indicate that both state and trait anxiety were positively correlated with recalling the number and content of attitude items on which disagreements occurred, as well as low attraction toward the neutral stranger. The correlations were significant for the more stable attribute of trait anxiety, but not for the situation-specific state anxiety.

The pattern of results involving social desirability supported the second hypothesis. High social desirability scores were associated with attraction toward the accomplice and the number of issues recalled as agreements. High S.D.'s were not more likely to recall the topics of agreement, but there was a nearly significant negative correlation ($r = -.31$) between social desirability and topics of disagreement recalled. It is also noteworthy that anxiety scores for both the trait and state scales were negatively correlated with social desirability.

Discussion

The results of the present study provide support for the everyday observation that some individuals are more disposed toward liking strangers than others. Holding the proportion of agreements constant at an intermediate level permitted the expression of individual differences in attraction. Anxiety and social desirability apparently influence interpersonal attraction by promoting selective perception. These two dimensions may operate as psychological sets for different types of interpersonal relationships.

Distortions of the degree of agreement-disagreement evident in the recall data may only be possible in ambiguous situations. This could explain the mixed findings regarding individual differences in attraction research reviewed by Byrne (1971). Future research might profitably examine the relationship between personality attributes and attraction under varying degrees of attitude agreement-disagreement.

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Table 1

Personality Correlates of Attraction and Recall

<u>Attraction (I.J.S.)</u>	<u>No. remembered as agreements</u>	<u>No. remembered as disagreements</u>
S.D. $r = .42$	S.D. $r = .33$	S.D. $r = -.41$
STAX $r = -.34$	STAX $r = -.26$	STAX $r = .09$
TRAX $r = -.26$	TRAX $r = -.39$	TRAX $r = .35$

<u>Topics of agreement recalled</u>	<u>Topics of disagreement recalled</u>	<u>S.D. - STAX</u>	<u>S.D. - TRAX</u>
S.D. $r = .06$	S.D. $r = -.31$	$r = -.53$	$r = -.61$
STAX $r = -.29$	STAX $r = .14$		
TRAX $r = -.40$	TRAX $r = .39$		

$r \geq .32, p < .05, 38 \text{ df, two-tailed test}$

$r \geq .27, p < .10, 38 \text{ df, two-tailed test}$

Social Desirability (S.D.)

State Anxiety (STAX)

Trait Anxiety (TRAX)