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Personality and Romantic Attraction



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Synonyms

[Attraction](#); [Attractiveness](#); [Mate choice](#); [Mate selection](#); [Partner choice](#); [Romantic interest](#)

Definition

Romantic attraction is a complex and multifaceted construct. It refers to positive reactions toward a potential romantic partner, usually at initial or early-stage encounters in which no close relationship has been established yet. Positive reactions toward a potential partner may include positive thoughts and beliefs (cognitive component), positive feelings and emotions (affective component), a desire to approach the other (motivational component), and also behavioral reactions, such as standing or sitting closer (behavioral component; [Wurst and Back 2018](#)). As romantic attraction may motivate further contact with a potential partner, it can constitute a basis on which new romantic relationships form. Thus, choices such as expressing interest in seeing a potential partner

again in dating contexts like speed or online dating can be viewed as indicators of romantic interest. Such initial choices should, however, be clearly distinguished from actual partner choice, i.e., opting for a specific individual to pursue and build a romantic relationship.

Introduction

What characteristics make people attractive as romantic partners is one of the major questions in the study of close relationships. Early studies focused, among other aspects, on the role of physical attractiveness and similarity in attraction processes. To minimize the effects of potential confounding variables, most studies were conducted in highly controlled settings in which participants were asked how romantically attractive a hypothetical partner was based on limited information (i.e., pictures, scales, vignettes, or scenarios). Often, the bogus stranger paradigm ([Byrne 1971](#)) was used: Participants indicated their (romantic) attraction to a stranger based on photographs and/or scales, which were supposedly filled out by a fellow student but in fact experimentally manipulated. Interactions with potential partners were mostly simulated with the help of confederates. Using these designs ensures that attraction ratings were based on no other information than the variable(s) of interest.

Studies of this nature found that people are more attracted to physically attractive individuals

and those similar to themselves. However, this approach was later widely criticized for its lack of validity (e.g., Luo and Zhang 2009). Romantic attraction in real life differs from what these studies could capture to a great degree. First and foremost, attraction in real life typically takes place in settings that allow for some kind of meaningful interaction which provides individuals with a variety of information, none of it in the form of scales. To address these issues, research shifted from studying romantic attraction in the laboratory with artificial stimuli toward more realistic approaches. Frequently, these newer studies involve interactions in which participants can form impressions about a potential partner's characteristics.

Thus, in this entry, we put an emphasis on studies employing more realistic approaches along with ecologically valid indicators of romantic attraction, such as the expressed desire to see someone again or initial choice, whenever possible. We will not, however, cover what we have termed actual partner choice, mainly because data speaking to this point is still lacking (for an exception, see Gerlach et al. 2017). We will refer to personality in its broader sense and will move from interindividual differences in physical attractiveness and Big Five personality dimensions toward more specific personality traits such as shyness, sociosexuality, and narcissism as predictors of romantic attraction.

Physical Attractiveness

People are not only more attracted to good-looking others when it comes to hypothetical decisions but also in real-life dating situations (cf. Feingold 1990): Using data of a commercial speed dating service, Kurzban and Weeden (2005) found that daters who rated their body and face as more attractive were indeed more likely to elicit romantic interest after short interactions. This pattern also held in more controlled speed dating studies where targets' attractiveness was judged by independent raters: Physical attractiveness was the strongest predictor of romantic interest in the college sample of Luo and Zhang (2009) as well as in the larger and more diverse sample of Asendorpf et al. (2011). On online dating sites,

singles with profile pictures rated as most attractive received eleven (males) and twenty-six (females) times more messages than those with the least attractive pictures (Rudder 2009). Olderbak et al. (2017) presented college students video recordings of other students, who had to answer a variety of questions typical for dating situations. Recorded students rated themselves and, based on the videos, other students rated them on aspects such as physical attractiveness, personality, and mate value. Among all these variables, only physical attractiveness predicted romantic attraction. Taken together, results from a variety of research paradigms seem to hold a clear message: Physical attractiveness plays a huge role in processes of romantic attraction and as soon as physical attractiveness is taken into account, few other personality traits do still predict romantic attraction (i.e., possess incremental validity).

While people's preference for physically attractive others is well documented, an open question is how this preference can be explained. Several mechanisms are discussed in the literature. In line with the well-known halo effect, people ascribe a number of positive attributes (e.g., being nice or competent) to physically attractive others (Langlois et al. 2000). Moreover, these attributions seem to be accurate to some degree (Langlois et al. 2000), rendering attraction to good-looking individuals potentially beneficial when searching for an optimal romantic partner. From an evolutionary perspective, physical attractiveness has been discussed as an indicator of health and reproductive potential (e.g., Buss et al. 2001) and should thus be desirable (but see Foo et al. 2017).

On a cautious note, the large effects of physical attractiveness on romantic attraction could at least in part originate from researchers' main topics of interest and concomitant designs. In particular, while speed datings' short interactions are well suited to study initial romantic interest, these short interactions come with the downside of providing only limited information about potential partners. Although people can assess personality variables of others with some accuracy based on limited information (e.g., Borkenau et al. 2004),

how someone looks is particularly easy to detect and may thus be particularly influential in such brief encounters. With longer acquaintance, however, traits other than physical attractiveness may come into play (Miller and Todd 1998). Consistent with this idea, the assortative mating correlation for attractiveness in romantic couples has been shown to decrease when partners knew each other for a longer time before entering the relationship (Hunt et al. 2015).

Big five

The five-factor model of personality (FFM, frequently also called Big Five, although there are slight differences, see De Fruyt et al. 2004) is the most established taxonomy of personality. It consists of the five dimensions: extraversion, neuroticism, conscientiousness, agreeableness, and openness to experience (McCrae and Costa 1997). A number of studies have tried to predict romantic attraction based on FFM dimensions.

When asked about hypothetical ideal partners, people who are high in extraversion, low in neuroticism, high in conscientiousness, and high in agreeableness are preferred (Figueredo et al. 2006). In their speed dating study, Luo and Zhang (2009) found the very same pattern yet only for men's attraction toward women: Men were more interested in women who were high in extraversion, low in neuroticism, high in conscientiousness, and high in agreeableness. For women, surprisingly, personality as captured by the FFM did not influence whom they wanted to see again – only men's physical attractiveness did.

Employing a large college sample, Humbad (2012) replicated the effect of extraversion on romantic attraction for both sexes but with small effect sizes. Yet in a more age-diverse community sample, extraversion did not predict romantic interest (Asendorpf et al. 2011). Instead, Asendorpf et al. attained an effect of male sociosexuality, a trait describing the tendency to be interested in uncommitted relationships and casual sex (which is weakly linked to, yet far from synonymous with, extraversion) on female yesses. Taken together, it appears that extraversion may have a positive effect on romantic attraction, albeit not consistently so.

Neither Asendorpf et al. nor Humbad replicated the preference for individuals high in conscientiousness and agreeableness. The impact of neuroticism received some support in Humbad, who found that women were more interested in less neurotic men. Again, Asendorpf et al. did not find an effect of neuroticism in their analyses, but instead found a negative effect of male shyness (a trait constituting a blend of high neuroticism and low extraversion) on women's attraction to men. Finally, openness to experience predicted the romantic interest of women toward men to a small extent in Asendorpf et al., but was unrelated to romantic attraction in all other studies.

In sum, findings regarding Big Five effects on romantic attraction are highly inconsistent, with extraversion receiving the strongest support to influence romantic attraction. To date, it remains unclear whether the diverging findings may be attributed to the different populations investigated in the different studies (e.g., college vs. community sample, US vs. German participants).

Narcissism

Narcissistic individuals are characterized by an inflated and overly positive view of the self, including a strong sense of superiority, specialness, and feelings of entitlement. There is mounting evidence that being narcissistic is beneficial for early romantic attraction. In a series of studies, Dufner et al. (2013) did not only find narcissism to be romantically appealing in an experiment similar to the bogus stranger paradigm mentioned above but could also show that narcissistic individuals are seen as more attractive mates by their peers. Further, they put the idea of narcissists' strong romantic appeal to an ecologically valid test by measuring male college students' narcissism and asking them to approach women in a public place. Male students higher in narcissism were more successful when approaching women, i.e., received contact information more frequently. Finally, narcissists' mate appeal was mediated by physical attractiveness (also see Holtzman and Strube 2010) and social boldness (in essence, extraversion) in these studies.

The link between narcissism and romantic attraction was also corroborated in a recent speed dating study by Jauk et al. (2016), in which more narcissistic speed daters were seen as more attractive as long-term and short-term mates. Interestingly, the mechanisms underlying male and female mate appeal seemed to differ: It was extraversion that made narcissistic men attractive to the other sex, yet higher attractiveness mediated narcissistic women's appeal to men in this study.

The appeal narcissistic individuals have in initial encounters seems surprising given the problems narcissists face in long-term relationships (Wurst et al. 2017). However, these seemingly opposing effects can be explained by facets of the narcissistic personality construct: Whereas narcissists' tendency to be charming, self-assured, and entertaining (also called the admiration facet, Back et al. 2013) is attractive to others, their relationship problems are driven by narcissists' derogative, exploitative, and insensitive tendencies (the rivalry facet; Wurst et al. 2017).

In sum, narcissism seems to be conducive to romantic attraction. Given the diverging effects of narcissistic admiration and rivalry identified by Wurst and colleagues (2017), future attraction research should strive to differentiate between agentic and antagonistic facets of the narcissistic personality construct.

Personality Similarity

So far, we have discussed which personality traits may contribute to others' romantic attraction toward an individual. What is seen as attractive, however, can also depend also on one's own personality. A widely held idea is that the fit between personalities matters, i.e., people should be more attracted to others (dis)similar to themselves.

Most studies, using hypothetical contexts, found strong support for the hypothesis that people report attraction to others who possess similar attitudes and values. Similarity in personality, however, was studied less frequently and effects were less robust (Klohn and Luo 2003). A meta-analysis by Montoya et al. (2008) found that similarity in general is strongly related to romantic attraction in hypothetical contexts

(when no interaction took place) but showed only weak to moderate associations in studies involving short interactions. Moreover, perceived instead of actual similarity was more strongly associated with attraction in these short interaction studies.

Klohn and Luo (2003) tested several conflicting hypotheses regarding the role of similarity in personality (i.e., attachment style) in experiments of hypothetical nature. They found that similarity in personality predicted romantic attraction, but whether participants saw themselves as similar to a potential romantic partner was more strongly related to romantic attraction. In their speed dating study, Luo and Zhang (2009) did not find actual similarity to be related to romantic attraction, which was replicated by Tidwell et al. (2013). Their speed dating study also confirmed the importance of perceived over actual similarity: Perceived similarity predicted romantic interest and perceived overall similarity was more closely related to romantic interest than perceived similarity on the level of specific traits. Nonetheless, the association between perceived similarity and romantic attraction should be interpreted with caution here. Unlike personality and attractiveness that were assessed before the interaction took place, perceived similarity can only be assessed during or following the interaction. This allows for an alternative explanation – namely, that perceived similarity does not predict romantic attraction, but instead is influenced by romantic attraction. For example, it is possible (and also not unlikely) that daters perceive others they are attracted to or “click with” as more similar to themselves.

In sum, perceived similarity seems to be a potent predictor of romantic attraction, whereas the effects of actual similarity are small to negligible.

Conclusion

Physical attractiveness is by far the most potent predictor of romantic attraction, and other personality traits seem to be less important once physical attractiveness is taken into account. Whether

broad personality traits as in the FFM predict romantic interest remains unclear with studies showing inconsistent results. Among the FFM dimensions, extraversion receives the strongest support, and it seems as if more specific traits like shyness or narcissism are better suited for predicting romantic interest. Research regarding the similarity of personality suggests that people are not necessarily attracted to someone who really has a similar personality, but rather to potential partners they perceive as having personality traits in common.

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