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The Social Psychology of Love and Attraction

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The Social Psychology of Love and Attraction



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Cheryl Boudreaux, Ph.D
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Abstract

Love is a universal emotion that has become the basis of marriage and family for many societies, which researchers continue to explore. This research will add to the knowledge of interpersonal romantic attraction, further exposing love's complex nature. Dr. Earl Naumann's (2001) survey in his book, Love at First Sight, served as a model for the survey utilized in this study. A total of 206 students at a Midwestern university were surveyed. Midwestern university students were sampled in two ways: first an e-mail was sent to the professor of every third class from the Spring semester schedule with at least 10 students in each class, and second, students were asked to participate in the study around campus. Students were at least 18 years of age. They were asked to identify what characteristics drew them to their partner or person of interest.

Keywords: interpersonal romantic relationships, romance, attraction, love, dating

Love and attraction appear to be universal emotions. Romantic love has been the norm since eighteenth-century Europe, when we began connecting marriage with romance (Lamanna & Reidmann, 2009), but confluent love is on the rise in Western society (Giddens, 1992). Romantic love refers to that which perpetuates gender stereotypes of the breadwinning father and homemaking mother; these roles remain persistent throughout the relationship. It is a love that is supposed to stand the test of time, enduring all hardship. Romantic love emphasizes being in love with a certain individual, "the one." On the other hand, there is confluent love that is more flexible with the roles that individuals play, and it emphasizes a relationship in which the growth of each person is important. The process of two individuals connecting in a meaningful way is particularly fascinating. Love and attraction in the Western world is seen as foundational to the formation and continuation of family, the basic bond between families. An ideology common to Western society is "*Love at First Sight*." While the majority of Americans believe in this phenomenon, those with higher levels of education are least likely to believe in and have this experience. Dr. Earl Naumann (2001) illustrated this point in his book, *Love at First Sight*, based on research on a sample from the general U.S. population.

In order to form a relationship, there must be some type of attraction, either physically or on a personality level. Initial attraction to a potential mate is highly associated with physical attractiveness. Many researchers have found this physical trait to be a major determinant in the dating and relationship process (Luo & Zhang, 2009; Simon, Aikins, & Prinstein, 2008; Langlois, Rogmann, & Reiser-Danner, 1990). Even during the earliest stages of life, infants show a preference for attractive faces (Langlois, Rogmann, & Reiser-Danner, 1990). Smith (1985) demonstrated similar results by showing that preferential treatment was shown toward the prettiest preschooler peers. Syn-

der, Berscheid, and Glick (1985) showed evidence that high self-monitors showed more interest in the physical appearance of their potential mates. For example, high self-monitors would be very self-conscious about their own appearance and would try to look their best at all times, whereas low self-monitors typically would not care as much. Clothing and cosmetics can enhance one's physical attractiveness, in turn creating a greater commodity on the dating market (Williamson & Hewitt, 1986; Buss, 1998). Physical attractiveness has a strong impact over the lifespan, affecting love and attraction.

Aging is negatively associated with the physical attractiveness. Margolin and White (1987) demonstrated that husbands actually become less attracted to their wives as their beauty fades, which negatively affects men's sexual and overall relationship satisfaction. While physical attractiveness is valued highly by both sexes, males show a higher preference for beauty than do females (Stiles, Gibbons, Harardottir, & Schnellman, 1987; Buss, 1998; Townsend & Levy, 1990; Feingold, 1990; Margolin & White, 1987; Sprecher, 1989; Nevid, 1984). It is evident that physical attractiveness influences who dates whom, but by no means is it the sole force of attraction.

There are a multitude of other factors that contribute to love and attraction besides physical attraction, including physiology and similarity. An example of the former is the effect of pheromones subliminally signaling attraction to a potential mate by men and women (Miller & Maner, 2009; Cutler, Friedman, & McCoy, 1998; Foster, 2008). Another example of the biological aspect of attraction is evident when the body is in a high state of physiological arousal, inducing the perception of others as being more attractive and sexually desirable (Meston & Frolich, 2003; Allen Kenrick, Linder, & McCall, 1989; Cohen, Waugh, & Place, 1985). Pheromones and attractiveness are only sufficient for initial attraction, and the passion that it causes will fade with time. These variables are not shown to lend substance to a relationship.

Research has shown similarity to be an integral part of a relationship that contributes to love and attraction. Oppo-

sites at times do attract, but people who share similar ideologies not only attract, but tend to have longer lasting and more harmonious relationships than those who do not (Buunk & Bosman, 1985; Lemay, Jr., & Clark, 2008). Leitner and Klion (1986) extended this finding to individuals with similar levels of self-esteem for those who had high self-esteem. People who share attitudinal similarity in essence share similar behavioral patterns. For instance, individuals who have a sedentary lifestyle may be overweight and seek out an overweight partner, just as an athletic type may seek out another athletic type, especially for younger and elderly couples (Schafer & Keith, 1990; Kalick & Hamilton III, 1986). Similarity proves to be another great promoter of attraction.

What influences attraction between two individuals cannot be understood without identifying the context in which it occurs. The context can be seen among nations or within one's own culture. Tang and Zuo (2000) illustrated this point by revealing that Americans are more likely to begin dating earlier, date more often, and become sexually active with their partners than are the Chinese, suggesting that the Chinese have a more restrictive attitude toward their youth being involved in intimate relationships than do Americans. Oner (2000) found that Turkish university students who exhibited more future orientation reported less relationship satisfaction versus those who were present oriented and reported being more content in their relationships, but sought out many short-term relationships. Contrary to these results, a similar study conducted by Sakalli-Ugurlu (2003) found that those who are highly future oriented were more likely to report greater relationship satisfaction. What people are physically attracted to can be manipulated through music lyrics (Carpentier, Knoblick-Westerick, & Blumhoff, 2007). Sexually explicit lyrics are connected to people zeroing in on a potential mate's physical attributes rather than personality or other traits in attraction. Qualities that may be appealing in one setting may be negligible in another and vice versa.

In *Love at First Sight*, Dr. Earl Naumann (2001) combined various perspectives to study the phenomenon of love and at-

traction. The surveys he implemented integrated items that called for information about what attracted each individual to the person he or she fell in love with at first sight. These items included physical attractiveness, similarity, ethnicity/race, education level, personal demographic information, and so forth. The present study used a modified version of the survey that he utilized to gain more comprehensive insight into how students became attracted to their potential mates. The results of this study from a sample of Midwestern university students will be compared to his findings.

We predicted that physical attractiveness and similarity would be the strongest predictors of attraction, in that order. Personality is developed through a person's identity, which is shaped by his/her perspectives on life, so we expect two people who share ideologies will have similar personalities. Similarity is also measured through demographic information about the participants and the person they fell in love with.

Methods

Participants

A total of 206 university students at a Midwestern university who were at least 18 years of age participated in the study. One survey was discarded because the person reported an unrealistic response of being in love more than 1,300 times. There was no way to verify what this exaggeration could mean.

Procedure

The proposed study utilized a modified version of the aided survey published in the index of *Love at First Sight*. The survey was given to the 250 university students in classrooms, in the student center, and in the library to diversify the range of students. As in the Naumann study, there was a pre-screening for age, and only students over 18 years of age were able to participate in the study. Every third class was randomly chosen from the spring roster to participate in the study. Students were approached at random and asked to participate in the proposed study or prompted in a classroom setting. The survey was collected after a 10 to 15 minute

administration period. Participants' identities were protected. The data were recorded with an identifying number rather than a name to represent the participants in the study.

Measures

The attraction of love at first sight and progressive love relationships were measured on Naumann and Associates's questionnaire through demographic, physical, and personality traits (among others).

Results

Preliminary analyses of data were taken from the descriptive statistics. Roughly, 79% of students chose personality over both physical and career/achievement traits as being the most influential in their attraction to the other person. The majority of the participants reported being in love (81%); the smile was named the most attractive physical feature (93%). Fun was the most desirable personality trait, as reported by 98% of students. The most common location of initial attraction was in an educational setting (33%), and second was through a friend or at a friend's place. A total of 72% of students reported that they were raised by both biological parents.

Further analyses were conducted using the Chi-Squared Test of Significance (see Table 1). There was a relationship between the response variable, "What was the outcome of that experience of love?" and, "Are you now or have you ever been in love?" (Figure 1). A weak relationship was found between being in a relationship and religion of the other person (Figure 2). There was also no relationship between being in a relationship and ethnicity of the other person (Figure 3). There was no relationship between being in a relationship and race of the other person (Figure 4). Even though there is no statistical significance between the type of family structure the student was raised in, the frequency shows that out of the 72% being raised by both biological parents, approximately 60% of those individuals reported ending up in a relationship. There is a similar situation for the participants' parents' marital status, with a frequency of nearly 68%; of that group, about 56% reported ending up in a relationship.

Row Variable	Column Variable	p-value
Relationship	Falling in Love	.000**
	Religion	.075*
	Ethnic group	.475
	Racial background	.227

** p < .05, * p < .10

Table 1. The Fisher's Exact summary statistics for determining whether there is an association between the row and column variables are given in the table above.

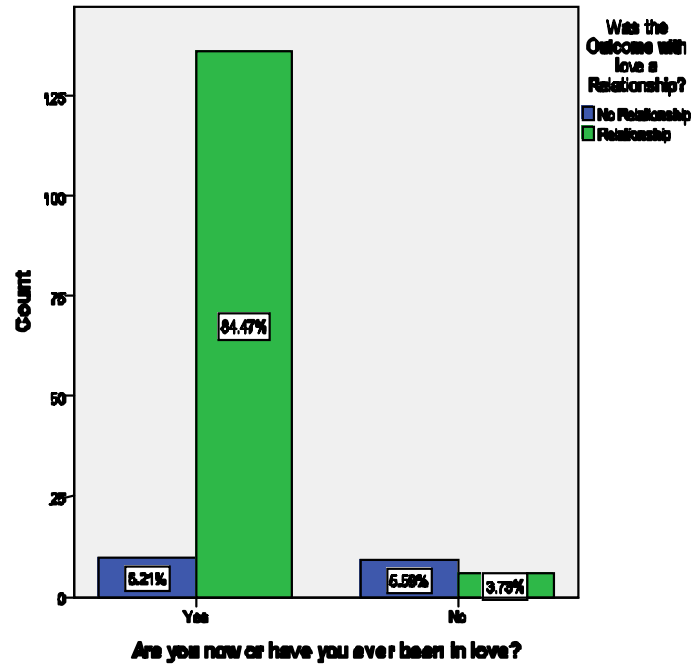


Figure 1. Likelihood of entering into a relationship if a participant fell in love.

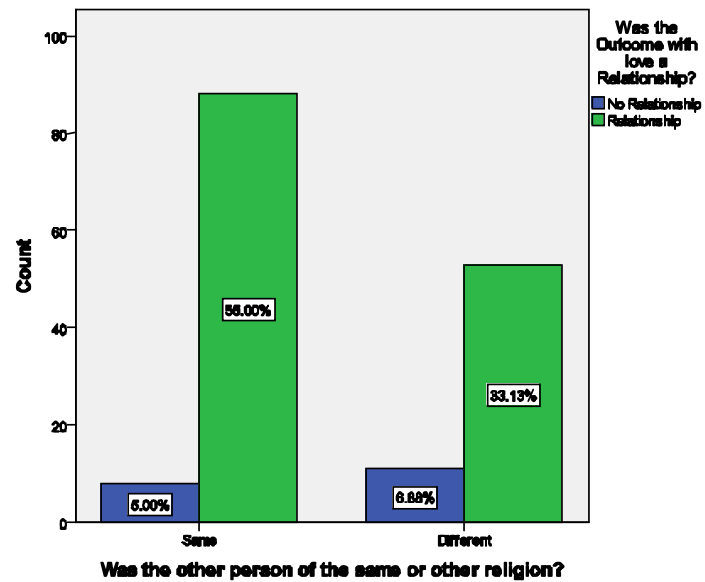


Figure 2. Likelihood of entering into a relationship if a participant fell in love with someone of the same or different religion.

Discussion

Our hypothesis, that physical attractiveness and similarity would be most influential in producing attraction, was partially supported by the frequencies of attracting a potential mate. However, physical attractiveness was not the most sought after trait for the person of interest as hypothesized, but rather it was only second to personality, which was reported to be most desirable. Therefore, personality was a stronger determinant of attraction that led to falling in love than physical attraction. The fact that more students chose personality as being a more important factor of attraction could be due to social desirability. In other words, students could have reported being attracted to the other personality so that they do not appear shallow in the researchers' eyes. However, I propose that the students' responses are accurate. Everyone takes notice when there is an attractive person in his/her midst, but mature individuals are aware of the fact that simply being attractive is not sufficient to sustain a satisfactory relationship. When people choose partners, they are more concerned with how the other person will fit in their lives. This is where the personality becomes important. An individual contemplates how the other person makes him/her feel, which outweighs the single factor of physical attractiveness. It is not rare to hear stories of individuals becoming attracted to and growing to love someone only after they had spent much time with that person. The time spent together allows intimacy to develop, deepening the attraction the individuals share. In other words, while the personality is not necessary for initial physical attraction, it has the power to promote strong feelings of attraction, and it can only enhance the potential for a relationship.

When asked to choose which physical features university students found attractive in their potential mate, they chose the smile and general attractiveness, in that order. The second most sought after trait was general attractiveness. When comparing Naumann's results, men and women ranked these traits in reverse. Why is it that the results are ranked very highly, but neither proves to be constant? Perhaps the smile is more important among a

sample of university students because the university is the first level of higher education. This is a time when people are becoming more independent and finding themselves, no doubt a vulnerable period in their lives. It was quite surprising that such a small gesture can have such a large impact, even though it supports the literature that suggests its significance at the time of initial attraction (Walsh & Hewitt, 1985). Smiling is a warm, welcoming gesture that signals openness to others at

time when many are feeling overwhelmed and isolated. For many students, being in college is their first time away from their parents in an unfamiliar environment. They are hoping to befriend others and form close bonds. Naumann's sample included anyone over the age of 21, while this study focused primarily on undergraduates. For this study, the age of participants fell mostly between 18 and 25. The varying age within his sample, therefore, yields different results because

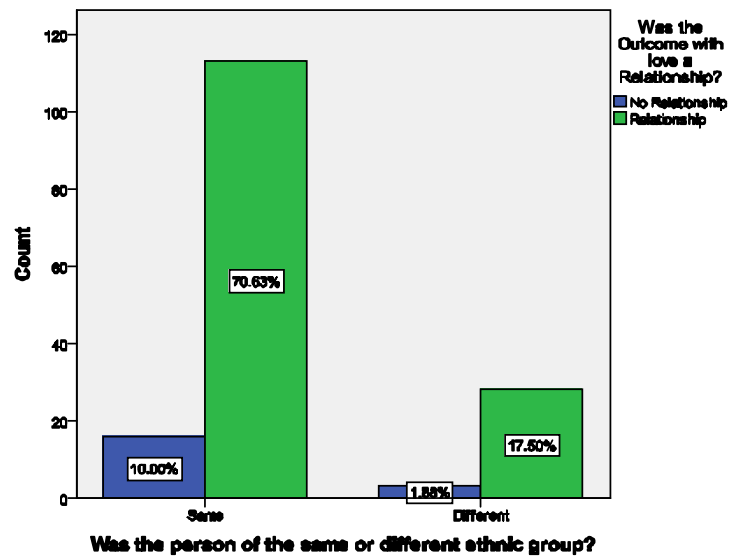


Figure 3. Likelihood of entering into a relationship with a person from the same or different ethnic group.

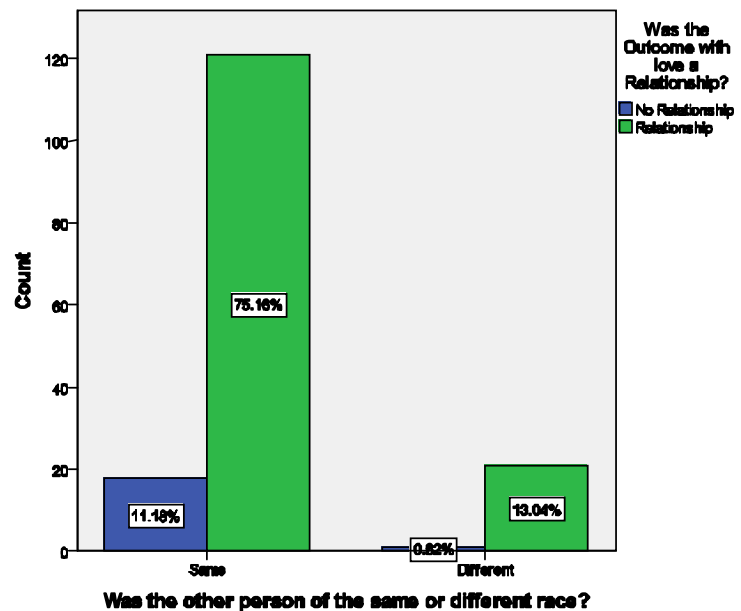


Figure 4. Likelihood of entering into a relationship with a person from the same or different racial background.

there are different life experiences that accompany age, such as getting married, raising a family, divorcing, and becoming a widow. Everyone does not encounter these circumstances, but for the vast majority, this reflects the life cycle.

A similarity found between Naumann's study and this one is that the students were more attracted to fun than any of the other personality traits. Traditional age students are more likely to seek out "fun" partners because they can feed off this positive energy, feeling stress free in an environment that is filled with the pressure of constant deadlines. Naumann concluded that his sample was also interested in a fun personality. Men rated fun as their most significant factor in attraction, while women rated it as their fourth most significant factor (following intelligence, kindness, and humor, respectively). Women in Naumann's study found humor to be the most attractive personality trait, which is closely related to fun. Someone who is not fun would not be perceived as having a good sense of humor.

The overall most desired trait and perhaps the most astonishing result from both studies was the personality. When falling in love, the personality is associated with a long-term relationship, while lust that is highly driven by physical attractiveness. Attitudinal similarity is conveyed through the personality, which lets the other person know how that person is likely to respond in a particular situation, especially within the context of a relationship.

For this study and Naumann's study, shared traits including similarity, religion, ethnic group and race were important features of the other person for over half the participants. Each of these traits is linked to a commonality in background. People are subconsciously drawn to others who have the same familial background. The familiarity breeds comfort. The more alike two individuals are, the more likely those individuals are to have a stable, long-lasting, and happy union.

A relationship developed most often when the participant had experienced love. In other words, individuals are in the process of falling in love over the course of dating or spending a lot of time with each other before entering into a

relationship. If dating proves disastrous, then there will not be a relationship. On the other hand, if dating is fruitful, the two become a couple with hopes that their love will unite them for a great while. Additionally, it should be noted that those raised by both biological parents, especially those whose parents remained married or were widowed, were most likely to experience falling in love and enter into a relationship. In line with the literature, these students probably witnessed a more stable union between their parents and were more likely to emulate what their parents modeled and thus entered into a relationship. It is necessary to model healthy relationships so that positive values and coping mechanisms can be present in future relationships through intergenerational transmission.

The results of this study further substantiate evidence from previous research involving interpersonal romantic attraction and relationships. As demonstrated in this study, the way an individual loves and to whom that individual is attracted are visibly affected by the relationships modeled by their caregivers, which supports the attachment and similarity theories (Holman et al., 2009; Luo & Zhang, 2009; Holland & Roisman, 2010), as well as the theory of beauty as a catalyst for attraction (Toma & Hancock, 2010).

The goal of this study is to further the research in the area of love and attraction with regards to university students. Results from this study cannot be generalized to the general undergraduate student population because there may be different regional climates that affect what students find attractive in other places, such as the Southwest or the East Coast. Additionally, the majority of students who responded that they had not been in love did not complete the survey while others did. They also expressed distress that they were not able to complete the study. Future research could examine the qualitative as well as quantitative approach to clear up any doubt as to what information the participants are trying to provide.

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