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PSYCHOLOGY OF HUMAN RELATIONSHIPS: INTRODUCTION

The Human Relationships option looks at relationships between individuals, including friendships and romantic relationships, and at relationships between individuals and group members of the same group or other groups and at relationships between groups themselves (intra- and inter-group dynamics).

In this option you will also study the topic of social responsibility: what makes people stand by instead of helping one another in an emergency; why some people are actively prosocial and assist others, sometimes at risk or expense to themselves, and how this prosocial behaviour of can be encouraged.

Our study of this approach is divided into three topics:
- Personal Relationships
- Group Dynamics
- Social Responsibility
PART 1: PERSONAL RELATIONSHIPS

WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW

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PART 1A: THE FORMATION OF PERSONAL RELATIONSHIPS

Key Question: Discuss explanations for our attraction to others.

No one approach can totally explain the formation of personal relationships. Just as humans themselves are biological, cognitive and social beings, so their behaviours also need biopsychosocial explanations. However, each of the approaches brings a unique insight into the processes that lead us to be attracted to certain people as friends or loving lifetime partners, and this will be discussed in this section.

PART 1A(i): BIOLOGICAL THEORIES OF ATTRACTION

Biological theories of attraction are based on the theory of evolution as proposed by Charles Darwin (1859), and on more recent research into brain activity in the form of neurotransmitters. Evolutionary theory explains behaviour as stemming from ultimate causes, in other words, behaviours that persist because they are advantageous to the continuing survival of the human race. This process occurs via natural selection, in which organisms that can adapt successfully to their environment are those that survive.

Evolutionary theories of attraction are based on the idea that sexual selection and its related behaviours must be adaptive for it still to be part of human behaviour. The ways in which males and females seek to attract the opposite sex for reproduction may be explained by looking back to what was deemed essential.
for our ancestors’ survival.

Current neurobiological theories use brain-imaging technologies to map out and pinpoint the brain structures and activity that may be linked to attraction; for example, investigating the reward centre of the brain and its link to addictive behaviour in relation to attraction. Evolutionary theory is rooted in our deepest history and is thus very difficult to support with empirical evidence. Neurobiological research presents us with visual evidence in the form of brain scans that may or may not demonstrate a biological explanation of attraction – the science is too young to offer any conclusive evidence as yet.

**Key Theory: Anisogamy and Evolutionary Mate Selection**

Anisogamy, a concept popularised by Trivers (1972), is based on the idea that male and female gametes (sex cells) require different levels of investment due to either their proliferation (e.g. the vast number of sperm produced in one ejaculative act) or their scarcity (e.g. females produce one zygote [egg] per 28-day menstrual cycle). Trivers argued that as one egg requires a great deal more energy and time to produce than a batch of sperm, then it follows that females will wish to be careful as to their choice of male partner – the egg is precious and must not be squandered on a sub-standard male’s sperm. Females will produce a limited number of eggs in their lifetime (add to this the fact that fertility for women has a shorter timeline than it does for men), whereas males can produce huge amounts of sperm on a daily basis if they so desire (or are able to).

So therefore females will seek mates who appear to be a ‘good investment’, in that they will look after the woman and her child materially. The woman’s role, in evolutionary terms, is to care for the child and to produce more children, thereby being unable to contribute to the household wealth. Men, on the other hand, will look for a woman who has the physical attributes that shout out ‘I am fertile’: a 0.7 waist-to-hip ratio; clear unlined skin; long glossy hair; full breasts; the look, in short, of youth. It is not difficult to find examples of such evolutionarily prescribed relationships, particularly in the realms of entertainment, sport and business.

**Key Study: Buss et al. (1989)**

**Aim:** To investigate the extent to which mate selection might be explained using evolutionary theory. *(Note: due to its scale and cross-cultural perspective this study can also be used to discuss the role of culture in personal relationships).*

**Method:** Over 10,000 participants aged 19-28 from 33 different countries were given a questionnaire which was either filled in by the participants, or read to them and their answers recorded (in cases of illiteracy). Information about each participant was obtained on one part of the questionnaire, e.g. age, religion, relationship status, mate preference, and on the second part of the questionnaire rating scales were used to indicate how highly certain characteristics, such as chastity, were valued. The participants were also asked to rank a selection of 13 personality characteristics according to their ideas as to mate preference.

**Results:** Overall the findings showed that males tended to value youthful looks (which may signal fertility) whereas females prized characteristics indicative of resources and wealth. Examples of such findings include:

- 97% of the females in the study valued a future partner’s financial stability and prospects more highly than men did.
- 100% of the males in the study showed a preference for a younger female partner.
Males rated physical attractiveness more highly than females did.

**Conclusion:** The study supports an evolutionary theory of attraction: males focused on looks, youthfulness and signals of fertility, whereas women chose signs of wealth and security and had an overall preference for older mates.

**Evaluation of Buss et al. (1989)**

- **STRENGTHS:** This is an ambitious study in the sheer scale of the design and number of participants involved and in the attempt to highlight ultimate causes in current mating behaviour. The large number of participants taken from a range of countries and cultures means that the data is robust and the findings generalisable, certainly more than if this research had been carried out in only one country. The researchers took care to ensure that all questionnaires had been translated from their original English and then checked by translators, increasing the reliability of the procedure. The use of the questionnaire, rather than interviews, means that the researchers were able to amass a large amount of data and in less time than it would take to interview individual participants.

- **LIMITATIONS:** The variety and inconsistency of the sampling methods used means that Buss et al.’s study is less representative than it may first appear: some samples were obtained via a self-selecting method; some were systematic, i.e. every fifth household; some were opportunity samples. The age range of the sample also limits the generalisability of the results as it does not include anyone over the age of 28. Reliability is also compromised due to the fact that the questionnaire was filled in only once, with no follow-up to check for consistency. There is also the issue of validity to consider: participants may have filled in their answers without much thought as to what they were doing; they may have been untruthful or prone to social desirability bias. Responses made on a questionnaire do not necessarily reflect how participants behave in real life, as they may say one thing and do the opposite, making the results of the study low in ecological validity.

**Critical Thinking**

**Are we merely products of evolution?** Buss et al. seems to suggest that we are, with its emphasis on the instinctive drives that produce mating preferences in both males and females. The findings appear to support the idea that men seek youthful looks and women seek material security in their mates, but surely there is more to relationships than this study suggests? The continuing existence of homosexual relationships would seem to refute the idea of anisogamy and evolutionary mate preferences, since the goal of evolution is reproduction, which is physically impossible (without external assistance) for two same-sex partners.

The theory also does not explain why some men prefer older women or why some women do not want children or marriage. These desires defy an evolutionary explanation. Evolutionary explanations of attraction are on the whole overly deterministic as they rule out the idea that human beings can exercise choice and free will in their romantic pairings; they also do not account for the idea that people may have many sexual partners over the years, of varying ages, body shapes and financial means.

**Key Theory: Neurobiological Explanations for Attraction**

A neurobiological explanation of attraction is one which is based on the idea that human beings’ brains are hardwired to experience euphoria, contentment and almost addiction to the heady experience of being in love (or lust, if one wishes to take a more cynical view). This approach to explaining attraction focuses on the workings of neurotransmitters, the chemical messengers in the brain, which are responsible for emotional responses to a range of stimuli. In the case of love/lust research suggests that it is the neurotransmitter dopamine that produces that ‘rush’ of excitement and pleasure associated with
the loved one, particularly in the early stages of a relationship. Other research has demonstrated a link between levels of serotonin and obsessive behaviour (which is often seen in lovers, again particularly in the early stages of the relationship).

**Key Study: Fisher (2005)**

**Aim:** To investigate the brain systems involved in early-stage intense romantic love.

**Method:** 10 females and 7 males who were students at New York State University took part via a self-selecting sampling method, aged from 18-26 years old (mean age 20). All participants reported being ‘in love’ (a range of 1-17 months with a mean of 7 months). Participants were placed in an fMRI scanner and shown a photograph of their loved one followed by a distraction task and then a ‘neutral’ photograph of an acquaintance with whom they had a non-emotional relationship.

**Results:** There was activation in the areas of the brain associated with feelings of reward and pleasure – the dopamine-rich areas including the ventral tegmental area (in the centre of the midbrain) and the caudate nucleus (again close to the midbrain).

**Conclusion:** The results suggest that people in the early, intense stages of romantic love access the areas of the brain most associated with motivation and reward, giving rise to the idea that people become ‘addicted to love’.

**Evaluation of Fisher (2005)**

- **STRENGTHS:** This is a highly controlled clinical method of obtaining data and Fisher and her colleagues checked objectivity at every stage of the procedure. Identification of the reward centres of the brain support to the idea that human beings may have an evolved brain system which ensures that they become ‘hooked’ on an individual, which increases the possibility of them reproducing. The standardised procedure means that the study is replicable, which increases its reliability.

- **LIMITATIONS:** The small sample size of 17 participants means that the results are not very meaningful and may not be robust in terms of statistical analysis. The sample comprised relatively young students from the same university, which also limits generalisability. Additionally, it is overly reductionist to use brain scans to determine how romantic love is experienced: there may be a range of other factors involved, such as similarity, same upbringing, shared ideals, cultural influences. So little is really known about the brain that there may be other explanations for the activation of the reward centres during the fMRI scan – perhaps the participants were simply excited to be in a brain scanner for the first time and this stimulated the dopamine-rich areas. Scanning participants’ brains is clearly an artificial task, which means that the results are low in ecological validity. Use of fMRI scans is also an expensive way to collect data, which is possibly why the sample is so small.

**Critical Thinking**

*Is neurobiological research too focused on what and not enough on why?* Research by Fisher goes some way towards explaining what is happening in the brain when someone is in love but it cannot, as yet, explain why attraction occurs. The use of clinical methods can pinpoint what is happening in terms of fMRI scans showing activated brain areas but it cannot explain the complexities of attraction. The phrase “What does she/he see in him/her?” is one which highlights how intensely subjective the process of falling in love is. One person may rhapsodise about their loved one while their friends stand by, stupefied by the seemingly unfathomable choice of partner their once-rational buddy has made. It is a phenomenon that may never be explained, no matter how sophisticated technology becomes.
Is Fisher’s research a victim of the self-fulfilling prophecy? Helen Fisher is a highly respected anthropologist who has carried out a wealth of research on the biological theory of romantic love – her TED Talks on the topic are particularly engaging and very enjoyable to watch. However, could it be as a result of her own passionate interest in this topic that she is so convinced that our brains are hardwired to respond to intense romantic love with activation of the reward centre that she is suffering from researcher bias? She has used an objective clinical method to obtain her data but fMRI images can be open to interpretation. Plus, assuming that it is reward and motivation that are associated with viewing a loved one is to assume rather a lot, particularly in the face of no other biological evidence to support this theory. It is clear that technology and science have to progress a lot before we can begin to form any firm conclusions.

Evaluation of Biological Theories of Attraction

Both the evolutionary explanations and the argument that the action of neurotransmitters is responsible for mate selection suffer from biological determinism and reductionism. They ignore cognitive (personal choice) and sociocultural (environmental) factors and concentrate solely on the connection they observe between current behaviour and evolutionary adaptations and between neurotransmitter actions and the feelings of pleasure associated with being in love. This is to raise a possible correlation to the level of cause and effect, and to pay no attention to other reasons, such as availability, friendship, and individual choice. Moreover, the evolutionary theories are unable to explain behaviour such as same-sex lifetime partnership that preclude having children, as all the attention is focused on the optimal development and survival of the family and ultimately the species.
PART 1A(ii) COGNITIVE THEORIES OF ATTRACTION

Cognitive theories of attraction are based on the idea that internal mental processes (e.g. decision-making or perception) influence the formation of relationships. For example, the perception of one’s own level of attraction is used to weigh up the choice of potential romantic partner (the matching hypothesis); sharing the same interests, traits and opinions as another person is used as the basis of relationship formation in the similarity-attraction hypothesis. Cognitive theories do not measure observable behaviours but rather what goes on internally which means that the use of the self-report method of collecting data is the most appropriate way of measuring the variables involved.

Key Theory: The Matching Hypothesis

The matching hypothesis (Walster, 1966) is based on the idea that each individual carries in their mind a rating of their own level of attractiveness. For example, an individual might rate themselves as a ‘6’ in terms of their own physical attractiveness. The matching hypothesis suggests that they will then seek a partner who is a ‘6’ too – or if they are very lucky a ‘7’ and if not so lucky a ‘5’, but anyone above a ‘7’ might be considered ‘out of their league’ and equally anyone below a ‘5’ might be ruled out as being not attractive enough. Of course, this rating process is entirely subjective and does not necessarily happen at a conscious level.

The matching hypothesis suggests that in making dating and mating choices people will be influenced by both the desirability of the potential match (what the individual wants) and their perception of the probability of obtaining the desired person (what an individual thinks they can get). Ultimately, an individual must make realistic choices if they stand a chance of having their affection reciprocated. Not many people are willing to risk rejection by pursuing someone who appears to be in another league, looks-wise: self-esteem is likely to fall if your requests are continually turned down by those with whom you seek a romantic relationship. In the long run, it is wiser to aim for romantic targets that are well within reach.
Key study: Taylor et al., (2011)

Aim: To investigate the matching hypothesis by examining real online dating behaviour.

Method: The researchers used the activity logs of an online dating site. They selected 60 heterosexual male and 60 heterosexual female profiles from the site at random. These 120 participants were identified as ‘initiators’, meaning that they initiated contact with other users of the site. Records were then kept to show who responded (‘reciprocating contacts’) and did not respond (‘non-reciprocating contacts’). They collected a maximum of six of the initiators’ profile photographs as well as the reciprocating and non-reciprocating profile photographs.

A total of 966 photographs was amassed by the researchers – 527 female and 439 male. The researchers appointed judges to rate the photos, using their own contacts to do this. The ratings were based on a 7-point scale of attractiveness (-3 to +3). Each photo was rated by at least 14 and at most 43 judges. Calculations were based on the mean attractiveness rating given to each initiator, to each of their contacts and separate attractiveness means for each initiator’s reciprocating and non-reciprocating contacts.

Results: Interestingly, the results do not support the matching hypothesis: the initiator’s physical attractiveness showed no correlation with the mean physical attractiveness of all the people they contacted on the site. What the researchers found was that the initiators tended to contact people on the site who were rated as more attractive than they were.

Conclusion: People do not necessarily apply the matching hypothesis when it comes to dating decisions.

Evaluation of Taylor et al. (2011)

▪ STRENGTHS: The use of actual online dating activity that is free from researcher manipulation or control means that the results of this study are high in ecological validity. The participants could have been influenced by demand characteristics due to the nature of the procedure. The use of correlational analysis means that it is easy to compare quantitative data and to look for associations between variables. The large number of photographs increases the strength of the quantitative data, making the statistical inferences more robust.

▪ LIMITATIONS: Even though this is a study that did not involve manipulation, it cannot claim to be completely valid: one online dating site is not a representative sample of a range of dating sites (e.g. it does not include homosexual dating choices). Additionally, people tend to present themselves in a somewhat edited way on dating sites: they may make aspirational dating choices or present the best version of themselves online in a way that is not possible in real-life. Furthermore, the issue of how the judges rated levels of attractiveness is bound by subjectivity and it cannot be said to be a truly objective measure that is consistent over time.

Critical Thinking

Are there too many examples that contradict the matching hypothesis to make it a valid theory?

The foundation of the matching hypothesis is that people tend to opt for partners that reflect their own level of self-rated attractiveness. To some extent this can be seen to be true. However, there are many examples where the matching hypothesis is not supported. Evolutionary psychology has pointed out that old, ugly, rich men seem to attract young, beautiful women due to the idea of anisogamy (see the section on biological theories above), but there are also examples of same-age couples, neither of whom are rich or powerful, who seem completely unsuited in terms of their looks. In this way the matching hypothesis only provides a partial explanation for what attracts one person to another. Plus, the whole concept of rating one’s own and others’ looks is entirely subjective: someone who rates as a ‘10’ for one person may
be judged as a ‘7’ by someone else. Is it really appropriate to use a statistical method to investigate such a subjective topic?

**The Similarity-Attraction Hypothesis**

The similarity-attraction hypothesis is based on a very simple premise: people who share similar likes, dislikes, interests, opinions and attitudes are likely to be attracted to each other or to form close friendships. This similarity may be real or perceived (i.e. people may believe their close friends or romantic partners are more similar to themselves than they actually are). Cognitive consistency theories offer an explanation of the similarity-attraction hypothesis, namely that if you like something but your colleague does not then this creates a cognitively imbalanced state, which makes you uncomfortable. A way of resolving this is to decide that you do not like your colleague and thus restore cognitive consistency.

**Key Study: Newcomb (1961)**

**Aim:** To test the similarity-attraction hypothesis; the idea that people are attracted to those who share similar attitudes to their own.

**Method:** 17 male students from a US university were asked to fill in a series of questionnaires asking them about their attitudes and values. The questionnaires were filled in before the students arrived at the university and subsequent questionnaires were completed during the course of the first semester. The variables measured were attraction between the students and attitude changes.

**Results:** In the first few weeks, attraction was related primarily to proximity (see Festinger’s research in the next section on sociocultural theories of attraction). As the semester progressed, however, attraction shifted to those who most closely matched the participants’ attitudes: 58% of participants who had been paired with a room-mate with similar attitudes had formed friendships compared to 25% with room-mates who expressed different attitudes.

**Conclusion:** This research offers some support for the idea that we gravitate towards those who share similar views to our own.

**Evaluation of Newcomb (1961)**

- **STRENGTHS:** This study played out in real-time with no manipulation from the researchers, giving the results high ecological validity. The responses given by the pre-university students were validated by the choices and preferences they made as the semester progressed, which seems to point to a strong case for the idea that similarity breeds attraction. Cross-cultural evidence offers extra validation to the similarity-attraction hypothesis: Brewer (1961) interviewed 1,500 tribespeople in East Africa and found that perceived similarity was a strong factor in determining liking between tribes. A much more recent study, by Markey and Markey (2007), again using US university students, also confirmed that there is a tendency for people to seek a version of themselves in their partner.

- **LIMITATIONS:** The small sample size of 17 and the fact that the participants were all male US students makes the findings difficult to generalise to those outside of this demographic. The use of the questionnaires means that responses might have been prone to social desirability bias, with participants possibly wanting to please the researchers (who were, after all, providing them with free accommodation for a semester), which would invalidate their responses.

**Critical Thinking**

*How might Newcomb’s findings be used in the real world?* The results of psychological studies are often fascinating but without them having a direct application in the real world, some of them may not be very...
useful in practical terms. The findings of Newcomb (1961) might be used in a variety of real contexts: knowing that similarity breeds attraction is useful if you have a product to advertise e.g. the choice of a famous person or brand qualities that ‘chime’ with your target market. Similarity might also be utilised by politicians hoping to gain votes from a particular sector of the electorate; by salespeople who really want you to like them so that they can sell their product to you; and on more humanitarian grounds by charities that hope to appeal to a particular type of person for donations.

Evaluation of Cognitive Theories of Attraction

The results of cognitive research into attraction appear to suggest that human beings do not like to indulge in very much effort when thinking about their ideal mate: their ideal mate appears to be a version of themselves. However, as the research was conducted in US universities where a certain amount of homogeneity amongst the students may be expected, perhaps the results were not so surprising. The use of self-report studies, as with Newcomb’s research, can lead to subjectivity and participant expectations. Like biological research, this is a very individualistic and reductionist approach that ignores sociocultural influences on interpersonal attraction.
REFERENCES


