

# Perceived similarity and liking as functions of manipulated similarity and subjective social favorability

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*Perceived similarity and liking were measured as functions of manipulated similarity of attributes with high or neutral (subjectively perceived) social appropriateness. Similarity was strongly affected by the manipulation under both levels of social appropriateness, but individuals manipulated as highly similar on "desirable" attributes were perceived as more similar than those on "neutral" attributes, while "dissimilar" others on "desirable" attributes were perceived as more dissimilar than those described as dissimilar on "neutral" attributes. Liking for similar other was greater than that for dissimilar other, but no main or interaction effects due to social appropriateness occurred.*

Various studies by Byrne (1961), Byrne & Wong (1962), Byrne & Nelson (1964), and Smith (1958) show that S's liking for another person (P) perceived as similar is greater than that for a dissimilar person. An obvious confounding aspect of these findings is that of the social desirability (Edwards, 1957) or favorability (Cronbach, 1955) of P's alleged qualities. If S perceives his own attributes as "good," then he may like a similar P because he is also "good," or because he is similar.

If, on the other hand, S perceives similarity on attributes which are "neutral" from the standpoint of social desirability, this confounding effect can be eliminated. Further, it may be advisable to establish the degree of social desirability for given attributes subjectively, rather than on the basis of nomothetic scales.

## Method<sup>2</sup>

Attitude measures were obtained by having Ss from three class sections indicate their preferences on a 7-point scale among 64 binary choices. A few of the items were selected from Goldberg & Rorer's (1966) opinion questionnaire and attitude inventory, others were simple preferences between academic subjects, and political, social, and religious values. On a second scale for each item, Ss also indicated what might be the "socially appropriate" answer to give.

For 64 male and female Ss, nine "crucial" items were selected according to the following criteria:

**High social favorability condition.** Ss' preferences on these items coincided (with 1/2 point tolerance) with the position they perceived as socially favorable, and was either strongly positive or strongly negative. Given scale midpoints of 4, S's position was  $X=1, 2$  or  $X=6, 7$ .

**Neutral social favorability condition.** For these Ss items were selected for which Ss perceived no social sanction

to support their own strong stand. Hence, S's own stand was defined as above, but the perceived social favorability hovered about the neutral point,  $3 \leq X \leq 5$ .

During the experimental session proper, Ss from different course sections reported in pairs, and were led at once to separate rooms. E then presented the situation over an intercom: Ss were to perform varied tasks concerned with understanding others and predicting their behavior. Task 1 consisted of presenting each S with a questionnaire partially completed by partner (P), a shorter form of that completed some time ago by S. S's task was to predict how P would have answered the blank items. Actually, this questionnaire contained only the nine crucial items and only P's own preference scale with six items completed, and three left blank; the "socially proper" response scale was omitted. Before "guessing" P's answer on the three items left blank, S was asked to complete six out of nine items on a similar abbreviated form of the questionnaire, ostensibly to enable P to predict S's remaining three responses. (Note that this procedure necessitated individually contrived questionnaires.)

The questionnaire purportedly originating from P constituted the similarity manipulation.

**High Similarity.** Preferences on five items were in the same direction and differed randomly by no more than 1/2 point. The sixth item was 1/2 point removed from the indifference point (4), in the direction of S's preference.

**Low Similarity.** Five items were checked in the direction opposite to S's preference, and randomly differed from S's mirror image by no more than 1/2 point. The sixth item was again 1/2 point removed from the indifference point, in the opposite direction from S. P's sex was left unspecified in every case.

Thus, four conditions were produced, viz: High sim-

Table 1

Perceived similarity as a function of manipulated similarity and subjective social desirability of attributes

		Manipulated Similarity*	
		High	Low
Soc. Desir.	High	.58**	4.45
	Neutral	1.29	3.23

\*Significant *F* ratios: Manipulated Similarity ( $F=82.1$ ,  $df=1/60$ ,  $p<.001$ ); Manipulated Similarity & Social Desirability ( $F=9.03$ ,  $df=1/60$ ,  $p<.01$ ).

\*\*A lower score indicates greater similarity.

ilarity—socially favorable; High similarity—socially neutral; Low similarity—socially favorable; Low similarity—socially neutral.

### Results

Table 1 shows perceived similarity as a function of the similarity manipulation and the perceived social value of attributes. It can be seen, first of all, that the similarity manipulation was highly effective and that social desirability had no main effect.

More startling, however, is the highly significant interaction between manipulated similarity and social desirability. A P described as dissimilar was perceived as more dissimilar, and a P described as similar was perceived as more similar, where the attitudes involved were seen as socially sanctioned than where they were seen as neutral.

Turning to S's liking for P, only the similarity manipulation was meaningful (Table 2).

There remained an intriguing question: Was the relationship between manipulated similarity (MS) and liking due to some implied instruction to the effect that a person described as "similar" in addition to being perceived as more similar should also be liked more, or was it a genuine and presumably causal relationship between perceived similarity (PS) and liking (L). In the former case, the correlations between perceived similarity and liking within individual conditions should be near zero, while the second alternative requires appreciable positive correlations. Table 3 shows that the relationship between perceived similarity and liking is present only in the Dissimilar-Neutral condition.

### Discussion

While the success of what are frequently dubious similarity manipulations is gratifying, the interaction of social desirability and manipulated similarities is even more striking in its apparent symmetry. Not only is the "similar" other perceived as more similar where the attributes are socially approved than where they are not, but the "dissimilar" other is seen as more dissimilar in the High SD than in the neutral conditions.

Liking, on the other hand, was clearly independent of

Table 2

Liking as a function of Manipulated Similarity		Manipulated Similarity	
		High	Low
Social Desirability	High	5.40	3.12
	Neutral	5.40	3.58

Significant *F* ratios: Similarity ( $F=41.50, p<.001$ ).

Table 3

### Correlations between perceived similarity and liking within conditions

Neutral Sim	High Sim	Neutral Dissim	High Dissim
.13	-.39	-.49**	-.13

\*\* $p<.01$

SD, though highly influenced by the similarity manipulation. The absence of significant correlations between perceived similarity and liking in three out of four correlations may indicate that here, and conceivably in other experiments, we are dealing with something less than a genuine liking, and that S responds at least in part to some aspect of the manipulation implying that a similar person should be liked.

An alternative explanation for the weakness of this relationship might be that perceived similarity affects liking in a gross manner, but not within finer orderings: The similar O is liked better than the highly dissimilar one, but among similar Os the most similar one is not necessarily liked best; only where Os are dissimilar, and Os' attributes are not confounded by social desirability (the Dissimilar-Neutral group), the relationship is strong enough to emerge.

At any rate, the present study indicates that similarity, though perhaps only for its grosser graduations, is a powerful determinant of liking, while the effects of subjectively perceived social appropriateness are at best slight.

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### Notes

- The present study was conducted with the assistance of Ontario Mental Health Foundation Grant No. 93.
- The method here described is incomplete in that it omits procedures related to other aspects and findings of the experiment which are irrelevant to the present topic.