

# The impact of discussion on interpersonal attraction

ANNE V. GORMLY

*Trenton State College, Trenton, New Jersey*

and

JOHN B. GORMLY

*Rutgers University, New Brunswick, New Jersey*

The effects of similarity, format of presentation, and choice of topics for attitude exchange on interpersonal-attraction ratings was investigated in this study. Subjects met and exchanged views on six of eight high-interest attitude items in a 2 x 2 x 2 factorial design. Half of the subjects were allowed to discuss their views, whereas the other half read their responses from an attitude booklet. High-similarity (67%-agreement) and low-similarity (33%-agreement) conditions were crossed with the format conditions. Furthermore, subjects were either allowed or not allowed to choose the six items for exchange. Main effects were found for similarity and for format of presentation, but not for choice of topics for the attraction ratings. Subjects also reported greater satisfaction with the discussion format.

A well-documented phenomenon in social psychological research is that people are more attracted to those who share similar beliefs (Byrne, 1971; Huston, 1974). This relationship between belief similarity and attraction has been demonstrated in studies in which subjects are exposed to the written responses of a bogus stranger (Byrne & Clore, 1966). It has also been demonstrated in studies in which the subjects have more direct contact with others (Griffitt & Veitch, 1971).

Intuitively, the way in which a person is exposed to another's viewpoints would seem to be a factor influencing the person's attraction to the other. Levinger (1974), for example, presented a model of pair relatedness in which he distinguished unilateral relationships (Level I), in which pairs have little, if any, significant contact, from surface contact relationships (Level II), in which people meet or otherwise have contact with each other. An even more meaningful and significant relationship develops among pairs who are at the mutuality level (Level III). The more contact people have with one another, the more significant is the relationship and the more involvement each has with the process existing between them.

In a different study, McWhirter and Jecker (1967) found an effect for the type of presentation in an attraction and similarity study. Attraction scores were higher for subjects who exchanged views face to face than for subjects who rated a bogus stranger on the

basis of a paper-and-pencil attitude exchange in which they had no contact. In a more recent study, Sunnafrank and Miller (1981) found that subjects who interacted with dissimilar strangers before rating each other were more attracted to their partners than were subjects who did not interact. The effect was not found, however, for interactants who were similar.

One interest of the present study, then, was the relative effect of personal involvement when subjects had differing degrees of contact with a stranger in the attraction paradigm. In this study, subjects either were allowed only to read their attitudinal responses from an attitude survey or were allowed to go on and discuss their views with the stranger. It was hypothesized that, the more involved the subjects were in the process (the discuss condition), the greater would be the attraction scores, even for the subjects who received disagreement.

A second question addressed in this study was the effect of allowing subjects to select the attitude items that they presented to the stranger. It was hypothesized that subjects given a choice would be more committed to the exchange process and hence would show higher attraction scores than those shown by subjects who were not allowed to choose.

As with earlier studies on attraction, it was hypothesized that subjects in the high-similarity-of-attitudes condition would be more attracted to the stranger than would subjects in the low-similarity condition.

## METHOD

### Subjects

Ninety-four undergraduates (73 females and 21 males) who were enrolled in an introductory psychology course at an

This research was supported by a grant to the first author from the Trenton State College Faculty and Institutional Research and Sabbatical Leave Committee. Requests for reprints should be sent to: Anne V. Gormly, Department of Psychology, Trenton State College, Trenton, New Jersey 08625.

East Coast state college participated in this study for extra course credit. The subjects were assigned randomly to one of eight experimental conditions. The sex of the subject was counterbalanced for each condition.

#### Attitude Stimuli

Eight attitude topics selected from Byrne's (1971) Survey of Attitudes were selected on the basis of their high importance and relevance to college students. The topics included were: the legalization of marijuana, fear of the future, premarital sex, welfare legislation, interracial marriage, homosexuality, the death penalty, and belief in a divine being. Each topic had six alternatives, ranging from strongly *pro* the issue to strongly *con* the issue; there was no neutral alternative. For each of the attitude topics, *pro* and *con* discussion statements were developed. The discussion statements consisted of supportive reasons on each side of the issue: for example, "The death penalty has not discouraged serious criminals" (a *con* statement) and "The death penalty can act as a serious deterrent to people considering a violent crime" (a *pro* statement).

#### Procedure

The subjects and an experimental accomplice came to the laboratory and were placed in cubicles that were connected by way of an intercom. The student accomplices were of the same sex as and were unknown to the subjects. After the subjects had been familiarized with the use of the intercom, they were instructed:

"The study you are participating in is designed to look at the ways in which people make judgments about one another. In particular, we want to find out if and how judgments are influenced by the manner in which you receive information about another person.

"In this study, you will exchange a few of your opinions with another student. In order to control for personal appearance, gestures, and facial expressions, you and the other student will be in separate rooms and communicate by intercom. After you and the other student have exchanged your ideas on selected topics, you will be asked to make judgments about each other using a variety of scales.

"It is important that you try to form an opinion of the other person during the verbal exchange. The intercom set up allows only one person to talk at one time and I will monitor the opinion exchange in another room. I will refer to you as Person A and the other student will be Person C. That way your real name will not be known to the other person and vice versa.

"First, we have a short attitude booklet for you to fill out; the items in the booklet will serve as the basis for the opinion exchange. When you have completed the booklet, please signal on the intercom [here the experimenter showed the button and explained the use of the intercom], and I will come back with further instructions. Do you have any questions?"

The attitude booklet was then distributed.

Three independent variables were manipulated in this study: (1) the level of attitude similarity (high, 67%, or low, 33%); (2) the format of attitude exchange (read verbatim responses or discuss the issue); and (3) the degree of choice in selecting the attitudes for the opinion exchange (choice or no choice). The two levels of format and two levels of choice resulted in four experimental instructions. For the condition in which the subjects had no choice of items and were asked to read their responses, the instructions were:

"Now we can begin the opinion exchange. What we would like you to do is to *read* off six of your eight opinions you have just completed to the other person. I will be in the other room and will signal when to begin. You will read your first *starred* opinion, then there will be a period of time and then I will ask Person C to read off his/her opinion for the same item. Then

another period of time, and I will ask you to read off the second *starred* item and so on. There are six statements I have *starred* and when you and C have exchanged opinions on all six, I will come in with evaluation scales. Do you have any questions? If not, we will begin when I signal to you over the intercom."

The items selected for the opinion exchange were the same for all subjects in all no-choice conditions.

In the condition in which the subjects had a choice and read their responses, the following instructions were given:

"Now we can begin the opinion exchange. What we would like you to do is to *read* off six of your opinions you have just completed. You may pick which six items you want to read. I will be in the other room and will signal when to begin. You will read off your first selected opinion, then there will be a period of time, and then I will ask Person C to read off his/her opinion for the same item. Then another period of time, and I will ask you to read off your second selected opinion and so on. When you have exchanged opinions on all six of your selected items, I will come in with evaluation scales. Do you have any questions? If not, we will begin when I signal to you over the intercom."

In the third condition, the subjects had no choice and were told to discuss the items with the accomplice. The instructions were:

"Now we can begin the opinion exchange. What we would like you to do is to *discuss* six of your eight opinions you have just completed. The six items are *starred* in the booklet and you will be able to discuss each *starred* item freely with Person C. The restriction is time; you and Person C will have two minutes to discuss each of the six issues. I will be in the other room and you may begin when I tell you so. At the end of two minutes, I will interrupt and ask you to proceed to the second *starred* item and discuss that for two minutes and so forth. When you discuss each item, give your opinion as you have selected it in the booklet, then proceed with the discussion. When you and Person C have exchanged opinions on all six *starred* items, I will come in with evaluation scales. Do you have any questions? If not, we will begin when I signal to you over the intercom."

In the condition in which the subjects had a choice and were allowed to discuss their responses, the instructions were:

"Now we can begin the opinion exchange. What we would like you to do is to *discuss* six of your opinions you have just completed. You may pick which six items you want to discuss. I will be in the other room and you may begin when I tell you to do so. The restriction we place on you is time; you and Person C will have two minutes to discuss each of the six issues. At the end of the two minutes, I will interrupt and ask you to proceed to the second item you have selected and discuss that for two minutes and so forth. When you discuss each item, give your opinion as you have selected it in the booklet, then proceed with the discussion. When you and Person C have exchanged opinions on all six selected items I will come in with evaluation scales. Do you have any questions? If not, we will begin when I signal to you over the intercom."

The similarity variable was manipulated by arranging the accomplice's responses to either agree or disagree with the subject's responses during the opinion exchange. Half of the subjects in all conditions received agreement on four of the items and disagreement on two of the items (67% similarity). The other half of the subjects received agreement on two of the items and disagreement on four of the items (33% similarity). Agreement was operationally defined as an opinion 1 point removed from the subject's response on the 6-point Likert-type attitude scale. Disagreement was operationally defined as an opinion 3 points removed from the subject's response. In the opinion exchange, the subject always went first, followed by the accomplice's programmed response.

In the discuss conditions, the accomplice was given a script of discussion statements for each item developed for this study.

At the completion of the attitude exchange, the subjects were given a packet of evaluation scales. The two measures of attraction were: (1) Byrne's (1971) Interpersonal Judgment Scale (IJS), a 13-point scale measuring how much a subject likes an accomplice and whether the subject would participate with the accomplice in another study, and (2) the Evaluative-Behavioral Attraction Measure (E-BAM), consisting of three bipolar evaluative adjectives and three bipolar behavioral characteristics, thus yielding a scale with a range of 31 points (J. Gormly, A. Gormly, & Johnson, 1971).

A third evaluation scale (KNOW) asked the subjects to indicate how well they thought they knew the accomplice by using a 9-point scale ranging from 1, extremely well, to 9, not at all.

A fourth scale (S-RATE) asked the subjects to indicate how they thought the accomplice had evaluated them. This measure of perceived attraction was a 7-point scale ranging from 1, very negatively, to 7, very positively.

A fifth scale (SATIS) asked the subjects to indicate how satisfied they were with the opinion-exchange process on a 7-point scale ranging from 1, very much dissatisfied, to 7, very much satisfied.

At the completion of these evaluation scales, the subjects were given a postexperimental questionnaire that assessed their degree of awareness of the true purpose of the study or the deceptions employed and that allowed them to sign up for a copy of the results at the completion of the study. The subjects were thanked for their participation and were given credit slips.

**RESULTS**

A 2 x 2 x 2 analysis of variance of attraction measures, knowing, perceived attraction, and satisfaction ratings yielded several significant findings.

A main effect for similarity was found with the IJS but not with the E-BAM measure of attraction [F(1,86) = 6.502, p < .01, and F(1,85) = 0.696, n.s., respectively]. For the IJS measure, attraction scores were higher for the subjects in the high-similarity condition than for those in the low-similarity condition.

A main effect for the format of attitude exchange was found for both the IJS and E-BAM scales [F(1,86) = 10.224, p < .002, and F(1,85) = 7.738, p < .007, respectively]. The subjects who had been allowed to discuss their views had higher attraction scores than did the subjects who only had read their responses. All means for the IJS and E-BAM scores are presented in Table 1. Note that, for the E-BAM scores, the subjects in the low-similarity discuss condition had higher attraction scores than did the subjects in the high-similarity condition.

A main effect for similarity was found with the KNOW ratings [F(1,85) = 3.741, p < .057]. The subjects who had received agreement thought they knew the

**Table 2**  
Mean KNOW, S-RATE, and SATIS Scores

	KNOW	S-RATE	SATIS
High Similarity	5.52	4.81	5.12
Low Similarity	6.18	4.25	5.00
Read	6.00	4.26	4.56
Discuss	5.71	4.81	5.56

*Note—On the KNOW scale, low scores indicate that the subjects thought they knew the accomplice better.*

accomplice better than did the subjects who had received disagreement.

A main effect for similarity was found for the subjects' perceived-attraction ratings (S-RATE) [F(1,86) = 6.530, p < .01]. The subjects who had received agreement had higher perceived-attraction scores.

A second main effect for S-RATE scores was found for the format of attitude exchange [F(1,86) = 6.153, p < .016]; the subjects who had discussed their opinions rated the accomplice's attraction to them as being higher than did the subjects who had read their opinions. There were no significant interactions.

A main effect was found for the satisfaction ratings for the format of attitude exchange [F(1,85) = 13.048, p < .001]; the subjects who had been able to discuss their opinions had higher ratings of satisfaction with the exchange than did the subjects who had read their opinions.

Means for the KNOW, S-RATE, and SATIS ratings for the significant effects can be found in Table 2.

**DISCUSSION**

The predicted potency of the discussion format over the read format was demonstrated in this study. The subjects who had been allowed to discuss their views with the accomplice were more attracted to the accomplice than were the subjects who had been allowed only to read their viewpoints. Furthermore, the subjects in the discuss condition were more satisfied with the exchange and thought the accomplice liked them more. The impact of discussion can be seen in the elevated E-BAM attraction scores given by the subjects in the discuss condition for the disagreeing accomplice. This finding is consistent with an earlier study in which subjects in disagreement conditions showed a greater preference for continued interaction with a disagreeing accomplice (A. Gormly, 1979).

The similarity attraction hypothesis received further support in this study, although the E-BAM attraction scores did not yield a main effect for similarity.

Several explanations for the greater impact of discussion on attraction are possible. One explanation is that, in discussion, there is more contact and more disclosure of one's point of view.

**Table 1**  
Mean Attraction Scores: IJS, E-BAM

	Read		Discuss		Total	
	IJS	E-BAM	IJS	E-BAM	IJS	E-BAM
High Similarity	10.701	25.038	11.299	26.902	11.000	25.970
Low Similarity	9.045	23.091	10.955	27.091	10.000	25.091
Total	9.873	24.065	11.127	26.996		

In a study by Broder (1982), it was found that the more that female subjects disclosed about themselves to a partner, the more they liked that partner and themselves.

A second explanation may be that the subjects who had discussed their views actually had more relative information upon which to base their judgments of the accomplice. The subjects in the read condition were restricted to repeating forced-choice options that best reflected their viewpoints. The read-only subjects may have had lower scores because of their awareness of the limitations of the information exchanged. In fact, the subjects in the read condition were less satisfied with the process. This view is consistent with Kaplan's (1981) view that relative numerosity of stimuli has a polarizing effect on attraction ratings.

What is needed is further study in which the degree of personal contact and relative amount of information available are simultaneously examined.

Finally, allowing the subjects to choose the items for exchange seemed to make little difference in attraction or measures of satisfaction, perceived agreement, or familiarity with the accomplice. The choice was, in fact, a limited one, since the subjects had been asked to pick six (from a list of eight) pre-selected topics. Furthermore, the topics were ones that had already been judged to be of high interest to the students. A greater choice of topics, including high- and low-interest items, would give subjects more of an actual choice.

#### REFERENCES

- BRODER, S. (1982). Liking, own disclosure and partner disclosure in female roommates. *Journal of Social Psychology*, **117**, 303-304.
- BYRNE, D. (1971). *The attraction paradigm*. New York: Academic Press.
- BYRNE, D., & CLORE, G. L. (1966). Predicting interpersonal attraction towards strangers presented in three different stimulus modes. *Psychonomic Science*, **4**, 239-240.
- GORMLY, A. (1979). Behavioral effects of receiving agreement or disagreement from a peer. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, **5**, 405-408.
- GORMLY, J., GORMLY, A., & JOHNSON, C. (1971). Interpersonal attraction, competence motivation and reinforcement theory. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, **19**, 375-380.
- GRIFFITT, W., & VEITCH, R. (1971). Hot and crowded: Influences of population density and temperature on interpersonal affective behavior. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, **11**, 92-98.
- HUSTON, T. (1974). *Foundations of interpersonal attraction*. New York: Academic Press.
- KAPLAN, M. (1981). Amount of information and polarity of attraction. *Bulletin of the Psychonomic Society*, **18**, 23-26.
- LEVINGER, G. (1974). A three level approach to attraction: Toward an understanding of pair relatedness. In T. Huston (Ed.), *Foundations of interpersonal attraction*. New York: Academic Press.
- MCWHIRTER, R. M., & JECKER, J. D. (1967). Attitude similarity and inferred attraction. *Psychonomic Science*, **7**, 225-226.
- SUNNAFRANK, M., & MILLER, G. (1981). The role of initial conversations in determining attraction to similar and dissimilar strangers. *Human Communications Research*, **8**, 16-25.

(Manuscript received for publication October 3, 1983.)