Personal Relationships, **13** (2006), 135–150. Printed in the United States of America.

Interpersonal chemistry through negativity: Bonding by sharing negative attitudes about others

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Abstract
We propose that sharing a negative—as compared to a positive—attitude about a third party is particularly effective in promoting closeness between people. Findings from two survey studies and an experiment support this idea. In Studies 1 and 2, participants' open-ended responses revealed a tendency to recall sharing with their closest friends more negative than positive attitudes about other people. Study 3 established that discovering a shared negative attitude about a target person predicted liking for a stranger more strongly than discovering a shared positive attitude (but only when attitudes were weak). Presumably, sharing negative attitudes is alluring because it establishes in-group/out-group boundaries, boosts self-esteem, and conveys highly diagnostic information about attitude holders. Despite the apparent ubiquity of this effect, participants seemed unaware of it. Instead, they asserted that sharing *positive* attitudes about others would be particularly effective in promoting closeness.

Shared attitudes have long been assumed to foster positive feelings between people. Heider (1946, 1958), for example, proposed that if two people share a positive *or* a negative attitude about a third party, then psychological "balance" is established. Such balance, in turn, promotes friendship. In the current investigation, we explore a possibility that Heider apparently did not consider. Specifically, we propose that one type of balanced system should more readily facilitate interpersonal bonding than the other. In particular, we propose that a system in which two people share a *dis*like of a target person will promote closeness more readily than a system in which two people share a *liking* for that target.

The notion that people become particularly attracted to strangers with whom they share a negative attitude about a third party may seem counterintuitive at first. After all, theories of interpersonal attraction tend to emphasize the importance of socially desirable behavior in the early stages of friendship formation, noting that people typically strive to make a good impression on nonintimates by presenting the self in a maximally favorable light (Backman, 1990; Crowne & Marlowe, 1960; Jones, 1964; Rowatt, Cunningham, & Druen, 1998; Stevens & Kristof, 1995). From this perspective, an effective way to win the hearts of others is to express positive as compared to negative attitudes about third parties.

Consistent with this notion, in Folkes and Sears' (1977) classic demonstration of the power of positivity, people were more attracted to target persons who expressed favorable, as compared to unfavorable, attitudes about various people, groups, and objects. Whether targets ostensibly evaluated politicians, cafeteria workers, movies, cities, or college courses, those who seemed to like most everything (*likers*) received higher ratings of likability than did those who were less favorable in their evaluations (*dislikers*). If people generally prefer likers to dislikers, how can we maintain that shared negativity promotes interpersonal "chemistry"? One possible answer to this question is that Folkes and Sears' methods

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did not allow them to pinpoint precisely the roles of shared likes versus dislikes in friendship development. For example, Folkes and Sears' participants did not expect to meet—much less form a relationship with—the likers and dislikers they rated, making it difficult to generalize their findings to situations in which people discover shared attitudes about others during the process of friendship formation. Furthermore, Folkes and Sears operationalized attitudinal similarity in their work (Experiments 2–4) by manipulating the extent to which participants and targets ostensibly shared political party affiliation (Democrat or Republican), not by manipulating the similarity of their attitudes toward *specific* politicians. Although people who share political party affiliation may be assumed to hold some attitudes in common, their reactions to specific politicians might diverge sharply. Therefore, to test directly the power of shared negativity in friendship formation, we measure and manipulate the extent to which people share specific negative and positive attitudes about others in the current investigation.

Although we are aware of no evidence that sharing negative attitudes about others is especially effective in promoting chemistry between people, there is evidence that negative information about a stranger is weighted more heavily than positive information during impression formation (Anderson, 1965; DeBruin & Van Lange, 2000; Hamilton & Zanna, 1972; Peeters & Czapinski, 1990). For example, when participants saw either negative or positive behaviors depicted in photographs, the negative behaviors had a larger impact on their ratings of the targets' likeability than did the positive behaviors (Fiske, 1980). Furthermore, when judging an actor's suitability for a particular theater role, participants made faster decisions when they received negative as compared to positive information about the actor's personality (Yzerbyt & Leyens, 1991). The relative power of negative over positive information is similarly evident at a subliminal level, in that people process subliminally presented negative words more accurately and quickly than positive words (Dijksterhuis & Aarts, 2003). Indeed, in an extensive review of cognitive, affective, and perceptual phenomena, Baumeister, Bratslavsky, Finkenauer, and Vohs (2001) concluded that "bad" (negatively valenced) events and information receive more attention and more thorough cognitive processing than do "good" (positively valenced) events and information.

Consistent with Baumeister et al.'s (2001) conclusion that "bad is stronger than good" (p. 323), we argue here that shared dislikes—as opposed to shared likes—of other people serve as a particularly powerful bonding agent during friendship formation. By likes and dislikes of others, we mean evaluative (good-bad) reactions to—that is, attitudes about—either specific other persons (e.g., Stan, that woman over there, etc.) or groups of persons (e.g., lawyers, the British, etc.).

Gossip, In-Groups, and Attributions

Our formulation is consistent with several theoretical perspectives. First, research and theory on gossip behavior highlights the bonding power of shared negative attitudes. Gossip is defined as an exchange of personal information about absent third parties that can be either evaluatively positive or negative (Foster, 2004). From our perspective, then, gossip is a primary (although certainly not the only) mechanism through which people learn about the positive and negative attitudes that they share with others. Because gossip behavior both reveals personal information about the gossiper and communicates to the listener that he or she is trusted, it should "help cement and maintain social bonds" (Baumeister, Zhang, & Vohs, 2004, p. 112) by promoting feelings of closeness and solidarity in the early stages of friendship (Leaper & Holliday, 1995). Theorists have noted, however, that negatively valenced gossip may be an especially important mechanism of social bonding (Dunbar, 2004). Because negative gossip typically involves an exchange of unflattering information about other persons (Eder & Enke, 1991), it provides opportunities for downward social comparisons. These downward comparisons, in turn, can boost self-esteem and facilitate social identities by delineating the boundaries between in-groups and outgroups (Wert & Salovey, 2004).

The establishment of in-groups and out-groups may be an especially important function of negative gossip (Foster, 2004; Wert & Salovey, 2004). According to social identity theory, people derive self-esteem through their associations with valued in-groups, in part by viewing members of their in-groups as superior to out-group members (Gagnon & Bourhis, 1996; Tajfel & Forgas, 2000; Tajfel & Turner, 1979). It is thus plausible that the discovery of a shared dislike for another person through gossip fosters a sense of in-group solidarity that meets people's fundamental need for connectedness and belonging (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). Indeed, even momentary experiences of connectedness with a valued in-group can promote increases in self-esteem and enhance the positivity of people's social identities (Leary, Tambor, Terdal, & Downs, 1995; Tajfel & Turner). By gossiping with a potential friend about her dislike of a third person, the gossiper signals to the gossipee that she considers him an in-group member, which should promote self-esteem and grease the wheels of their friendship.

Second, from a social cognitive perspective, sharing negative attitudes about others may promote attraction simply because such activity garners attention. Because social desirability pressures compel people to express primarily positive, prosocial thoughts and feelings to nonintimates (Blumberg, 1972; Tesser & Rosen, 1975), public expressions of dislike for another person (or group of people) occur relatively infrequently in most social environments. As a consequence, when they do occur, expressions of dislike are liable to stand out by contrast and attract more attention than comparable expressions of positivity (Kellermann, 1984). Thus, people may be more inclined to notice others who reveal negative as opposed to positive attitudes.

Expressing dislike for a third party should also facilitate closeness because of what it seemingly reveals about the underlying disposition of the attitude holder. According to Kelley's (1973) *augmenting principle*, the more negative outcomes that follow from an actor's behavior, the more likely perceivers are to attribute that behavior to an underlying disposition of the actor (Jones & Davis, 1965; Skowronski & Carlston, 1989). When speakers reveal negative—as compared to positive—attitudes about others, they risk numerous negative effects such as being disliked, viewed unfavorably, and/or punished because of the impropriety of their actions (Folkes & Sears, 1977). The expression of a negative attitude about others, then, should be perceived as particularly informative about the *source* of the attitude; thus, to the extent that the listener holds an attitude similar to the speaker's, intimacy between them is more likely to occur (Byrne, 1971; Byrne, Clore, & Smeaton, 1986; Derlega, Metts, Petronio, & Margulis, 1993; Vittengl & Holt, 2000). But consider the case in which a person reveals a favorable attitude about a third party and her listener shares this sentiment. Although discovering a shared positive attitude should promote liking (Byrne), the listener cannot be sure whether the source really feels this way about the third party or merely says it to be polite (Jones & Kanouse, 1987). From an attribution perspective, the listener has less information from which to extract an impression of the source in the latter than in the former case of shared attitudes.

Overview of Studies and Hypotheses

Based on the reasoning outlined above, we propose that shared negative attitudes about a third party (an individual or group) will facilitate interpersonal closeness more effectively than shared positive attitudes. To test this notion, we conducted three studies. In Studies 1 and 2, participants listed the positive and negative attitudes that they shared with their current closest friends in the early and later stages of friendship, and we compared the number of positive versus negative attitudes about *specific others* that people generated spontaneously. In Study 3, we manipulated whether people shared a negative or a positive attitude about a third party with a stranger, and we measured the effects of attitude valence on feelings of closeness to the stranger.

Across studies, we also queried people about their folk beliefs about the relative bonding power of shared negative versus positive attitudes. Given the importance of socially

desirable behavior and favorable first impressions in the early stages of acquaintance (e.g., Backman, 1990; Jones, 1964), we expected people's folk wisdom to reflect the belief that positivity promotes attraction more effectively than does negativity. However, we expected people's actual experiences to belie their folk wisdom in that they should recall more shared negative than positive attitudes about others with their closest friends and feel particularly close to a stranger with whom they discover a shared negative attitude about a third party.

Study 1

If it is indeed the case that shared negative attitudes about others promote closeness more effectively than do shared positive attitudes about others, then people should be especially likely to recall the discovery of shared negative attitudes when they were just getting to know those individuals who later became their "best friend." In Study 1, respondents identified their single closest friend or relationship partner, rated their closeness to him or her, and then listed as many as they could of the likes and dislikes that they discovered they shared with this person while becoming acquainted with him/her. Because of the awkwardness of querying people about attitudes they shared with others whom they did *not* ultimately befriend, we did not include a non-close-relationship condition in this study (or in Study 2). Instead, we focused our attention in these first two studies on the negative and positive attitudes shared with close friends only and tested the association of shared negative attitudes to closeness in Study 3.

Method

Participants and procedure. A total of 30 men and 90 women participated in exchange for credit toward a course requirement at a large Southwestern university. Participants ranged in age from 16 to 25 years ($Mdn = 18$), and 84.9% of them identified themselves as White. In group sessions, participants completed informed consent forms followed by questionnaire packets. In the first part of the questionnaire, instructions prompted participants to list the first initial of a nonfamily individual with whom they had the closest and most intimate relationship. Most participants identified a platonic friend (59%) or a romantic partner (38%), although one person identified a coworker and two classified their relationship as "other."

After identifying their closest relationship partners, participants completed an attitude-listing task. Written instructions first defined attitudes as "likes and dislikes, opinions, and preferences" and explained that people can have attitudes about any animate or inanimate object. Next, a positive attitude was defined as a "favorable feeling about another person, object, or concept" and a negative attitude was defined as an "unfavorable feeling about another person, object, or concept." Respondents were then prompted with the statement "While we were getting to know each other, my friend and I learned that we both liked (disliked) _____," after which they listed as many as they could of the positive (negative) attitudes that they recalled sharing. To reduce demand characteristics, we did not query participants specifically about shared attitudes about other people; instead, we left type of attitude object unspecified. We counterbalanced the order in which we asked participants to list their shared positive and negative attitudes (because order did not moderate any effects, it is not included in analyses).

After the attitude-listing task, participants completed the Relationship Closeness Inventory (RCI; Berscheid, Snyder, & Omoto, 1989) with respect to their closest relationship partner. This inventory assesses three aspects of interdependence including (a) the amount of time (in hr and min) the participant and his/her partner spent alone together in the past week, (b) the number of distinct tasks and activities that the participant completed alone with his/her partner in the past week, and (c) the participant's subjective assessments, made on 7-point scales, of the extent to which his/her partner influences his/her thoughts, feelings, and behaviors on a regular basis. For unknown reasons, 28 respondents misunderstood the instructions for completing the first part of the RCI and did not provide usable data regarding the amount of time spent alone with their partner. Therefore, to compute final scores

we disregarded time spent together, converted participants' responses to sections b and c of the RCI to 10-point scales, and summed them (see Berscheid et al., 1989, for details regarding the RCI and its scoring). Results of a one-sample t test revealed that, compared to the theoretical midpoint of the RCI (10.5), participants followed instructions and wrote about relationship partners to whom they felt quite close, $t\,(119) = 2.25$, $p < .03$ (see Table 1 for descriptive statistics on the RCI).

Finally, participants responded to six items tapping their folk beliefs about the bonding power of shared positive versus negative attitudes about others. On scales of 1 (*not at all/never*) to 7 (*very much/very often*), participants indicated "the extent to which discussing another person whom you both like (dislike) enhances your closeness to someone," and "how often you have bonded with new friends by talking about another person you both like (dislike)." Using scales of 0% (*none*) to 100% (*all*), participants also estimated the percentages of their existing friendships in which they recalled "getting to know one another by talking about another person whom you both liked (disliked)." To compute composite folk belief scores, we converted the last item to a 7-point scale and then averaged separately the three items pertaining to shared positive attitudes ($\alpha = .78$) and shared negative attitudes ($\alpha = .85$).

Coding shared attitudes. In listing their shared negative and positive attitudes, participants generated several different types of responses, not all of which met our criteria for inclusion. For us to consider a response a distinct "attitude" it had to be unique (i.e., nonredundant) and convey explicitly a positive or negative evaluation of a person or nonperson object. (Although our primary interest was in shared attitudes about other people, we included attitudes about nonperson objects in

Table 1. *Descriptive statistics and intercorrelations among variables in Studies 1 and 2*

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Study 1							
1. RCI Score	—	.05	.21*	.13	.10	.06	.04
2. PFB		—	.13	.03	−.02	.09	.14
3. NFB			—	−.15	.02	.03	.02
4. PNPA				—	.42**	.21*	.50**
5. NNPA					—	.15	.05
6. PPA						—	.27**
7. NPA							—
M	10.97	4.67	3.38	56.06	22.37	6.33	15.24
SD	2.27	1.25	1.46	17.68	16.90	10.43	13.89
Study 2							
1. Closeness	—	.17	−.03	.10	.11	−.04	−.05
2. PFB		—	.31**	.07	−.09	−.04	.06
3. NFB			—	−.17	−.04	−.17	.00
4. PNPA				—	.57**	.35*	.65**
5. NNPA					—	.14	.33**
6. PPA						—	.44**
7. NPA							—
M	4.06	4.51	3.61	57.72	20.05	5.23	17.00
SD	0.45	1.29	1.46	19.72	14.63	7.76	12.40

Note. Correlation df = 118 in Study 1 and 82 in Study 2. RCI = Relationship Closeness Inventory; PFB = Positive Folk Beliefs; NFB = Negative Folk Beliefs; PNPA = Positive Nonperson Attitudes; NNPA = Negative Nonperson Attitudes; PPA = Positive Person Attitudes; NPA = Negative Person Attitudes.
*$p < .05$. **$p < .01$.

our investigation because they constituted the overall majority of attitudes that participants listed.) Nonqualifying responses included statements of shared experiences (e.g., "we both went to the same school") and worldviews (e.g., "we both believe that God is nature"). For each participant, coders classified each distinct positive and negative attitude according to whether it pertained to a person or nonperson object. Person objects included specific individuals ("our English professor," "this guy Jim") as well as groups of people ("the popular kids at school," "Baptists," etc.). The second author and a trained research assistant who was naive to hypotheses discussed each attitude and coded together with 100% agreement. To compute final scores, we calculated for each participant the percentage of his/her total listed attitudes that fell into the Positive/Person, Positive/Nonperson, Negative/Person, and Negative/Nonperson categories.

Results and discussion

Descriptive statistics for and correlations among all variables appear in Table 1. We tested for all main and interactive effects of gender, race, and relationship type on our primary dependent variables. Because none of these variables moderated any of our patterns, we do not consider them further.[1]

We submitted participants' folk beliefs about shared positive versus negative attitudes to a paired-samples t test. As anticipated, participants' folk wisdom reflected the belief that sharing positive attitudes about others promotes closeness more effectively than does sharing negative attitudes about others, Ms = 4.67 versus 3.38, t (119) = 7.88, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .34$.

To test our main hypothesis, we submitted participants' shared attitudes with their closest relationship partner when "first getting to know him/her" to a 2-within (attitude valence: positive vs. negative) × 2-within (attitude object: person vs. nonperson) analysis of variance (ANOVA). Results revealed main effects of attitude valence, F (1, 118) = 73.47, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .38$, and attitude object, F (1, 118) = 287.44, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .71$, that were qualified by a valence-by-object interaction, F (1, 118) = 170.55, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .59$. Mean percentages of positive and negative person and nonperson attitudes generated by each participant appear in Table 2. Simple effects tests revealed that people recalled sharing a larger percentage of negative than positive attitudes about other people in the early stages of friendship with their current closest relationship partner, F (1, 118) = 35.14, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .23$. Conversely, we also found an unpredicted tendency for people to recall sharing a larger percentage of positive than negative attitudes about nonperson objects with their closest partners, F (1, 118) = 156.79, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .57$.

These results suggest that sharing a dislike of a third party with a nonintimate may be a particularly powerful bonding agent in the formative phases of friendship. Even though both scenarios reflect balanced systems (Heider, 1946, 1958), friendship between two strangers may be more likely if they discover that they both *dislike* a third party than if they discover that they both *like* her. Interestingly, our findings suggest that the power of shared negative attitudes about others is strong in a relative, but not an absolute, sense: People indeed recalled sharing more negative than positive attitudes about other people with their current closest relationship partners, but the largest percentage of shared attitudes they recalled (56%) were positive and pertained to nonperson objects such as movies, activities, and beliefs. This finding raises the possibility that interpersonal closeness is best facilitated by a few shared negative attitudes about other people that are embedded in an overall matrix of shared positive attitudes about inanimate objects, activities, and/or ideas. Such an interpretation is supported by the trend for people who listed more shared negative attitudes about others to also list more shared positive attitudes about nonperson objects, r (118) = .50, $p < .01$ (see Table 1).

1. Although gender did not moderate any of our effects, a main effect of gender emerged such that women reported a larger percentage of negative nonperson attitudes than men did, Ms = 1.88 and 1.23, t (118) = 2.35, $p < .03$.

Table 2. *Percentages of shared positive and negative person and nonperson attitudes listed in Studies 1 and 2*

	Person attitudes		Nonperson attitudes	
	Positive	Negative	Positive	Negative
Study 1	6.33% (0.51)	15.24% (1.16)	56.06% (4.67)	22.37% (1.73)
Study 2				
Friend 1	1.89% (0.38)	7.21% (1.16)	24.35% (4.55)	6.99% (1.43)
Friend 2	1.65% (0.36)	4.34% (0.88)	17.29% (3.49)	7.03% (1.26)
Friend 3	1.01% (0.22)	4.78% (0.82)	16.76% (3.50)	6.70% (1.16)
Sum across friends	4.56% (0.97)	16.33% (2.91)	58.40% (11.55)	20.72% (3.81)

Note. Values are mean percentages of each participant's total shared attitudes that are positive/person, negative/person, positive/nonperson, and negative/nonperson. For Study 2, average percentage of total shared attitudes is shown separately for each friend and then summed across friends. Values in parentheses are mean raw numbers of each type of attitude that participants generated.

Despite having just listed a disproportionately large number of negative shared attitudes about other people, our participants claimed that sharing positive attitudes about other people promotes interpersonal closeness most effectively. Whether this response reflects genuine acceptance of the idea that good is stronger than bad, or concerns about conveying a favorable impression to the experimenters, we cannot know for sure. Unfortunately, our data are also open to a rival interpretation: It is possible that people's folk beliefs about the relative power of shared positive versus negative attitudes about others are correct and that our retrospective recall methodology did not provide accurate insight into the importance of shared negative attitudes in friendship formation. We address this shortcoming in Study 2.

Study 2

Because of the difficulty of catching people in the early phases of friendship formation to query them about the positive and negative attitudes that they share with their soon-to-be friend, we relied in Study 1 on people's retrospective accounts of the attitudes that they discovered they shared with their current closest relationship partner. A critic, however, could note that memory biases may have distorted participants' responses to our attitude-listing task. After all, the median length of the relationship that Study 1 participants wrote about was 4.08 years, meaning that half of them had to dig more than 4 years into the past to recall their shared attitudes from the beginning stages of their relationships. Thus, people may actually have shared more positive than negative attitudes about others with their closest partners, but they may have remembered more negative attitudes because of the perceptual salience of negative information. Therefore, in Study 2, we asked people to list as many as they could of the positive and negative attitudes that they *currently* shared with their three closest friends. We reasoned that, if shared negative attitudes carry special bonding power, then people should continue to share more negative than positive attitudes about others with their close friends in the later stages of friendship.

Method

Participants and procedure. A total of 29 men and 59 women participated in exchange for credit toward a course requirement at a large Southwestern university.[2] The procedure for Study 2 was identical to that of Study 1, with two small modifications. First, instead of providing the initials of their closest relationship partners only, participants in Study 2

2. Due to an oversight, age and race/ethnicity data were not collected in this study.

provided the initials of three of their closest friends, thus allowing us to test our valence hypothesis across multiple relationships. Participants then proceeded to list the positive and negative attitudes they currently shared with each friend (the order in which participants listed their shared positive versus negative attitudes was counterbalanced across participants; because order did not moderate any of our effects, we do not include it in analyses). Second, after completing the attitude-listing task, participants rated their closeness to each friend on a scale of 1 (*an acquaintance*) to 5 (*my closest friend*). We used this single-item measure of closeness instead of the RCI because of the difficulty that participants had with the RCI in Study 1. One-sample *t* tests revealed that participants indeed wrote about close friendships, as evidenced by the fact that their closeness ratings for the first, second, and third friends (*M*s = 4.50, 4.04, and 3.63, respectively) were all significantly higher than the theoretical midpoint (3) of the scale, *t*s (83) > 7.34, *p*s < .001. Finally, participants indicated their folk beliefs about the bonding power of shared positive ($\alpha = .79$) and negative ($\alpha = .85$) attitudes about other people on the same six items we used in Study 1.

Coding shared attitudes. Attitudes were coded using the same procedure used in Study 1, with the exception that the second author coded Study 2's data alone. Because the only judgment involved deciding whether a given attitude pertained to a person or nonperson object, and coders agreed on 100% of the attitudes in Study 1, we felt confident that one coder working alone could accurately classify each attitude. For each of the three friends they listed, participants received four scores reflecting the percentages of total (summed across friends) attitudes they provided that were Positive/Person, Positive/Nonperson, Negative/Person, and Negative/Nonperson. Thus, participants received 12 scores that, when summed, equaled 100%.

Results and Discussion

Descriptive statistics for and correlations among all variables appear in Table 1. Because gender did not moderate any of our findings, we do not consider it further. Degrees of freedom differ between analyses on folk beliefs and shared attitudes because 10 participants failed to list any shared attitudes (they provided responses to the attitude-listing task, but none of their responses met our criteria for an "attitude").

As in Study 1, participants' folk wisdom reflected the belief that sharing positive attitudes about others promotes closeness in their friendships more effectively than does sharing negative attitudes about others, *M*s = 4.51 and 3.61, $t\ (83) = 5.07$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .24$.

To test our main hypothesis, we submitted participants' shared attitudes to a 2 (attitude valence: positive vs. negative) × 2 (attitude object: person vs. nonperson) × 3 (friend: first listed vs. second listed vs. third listed) within-participants ANOVA. As in Study 1, results revealed main effects of attitude valence, $F\ (1, 73) = 43.02$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .37$, and attitude object, $F\ (1, 73) = 375.19$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .84$, that were qualified by a significant valence-by-object interaction, $F\ (1, 73) = 214.42$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .75$. Replicating Study 1's main finding, people reported currently sharing a larger percentage of negative than positive attitudes *about other people* with their closest friends, *M*s = 5.44% versus 1.52%, $F\ (1, 73) = 71.02$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .49$, but they also reported sharing a larger percentage of positive than negative *nonperson* attitudes with these friends, *M*s = 19.47% versus 6.91%, $F\ (1, 73) = 122.92$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .63$.

Moreover, a main effect of friend emerged such that a larger percentage of people's total attitudes pertained to their first-listed friend as compared to their second- and third-listed friends, *M*s = 10.11 versus 7.58 versus 7.31, $F\ (2, 146) = 9.13$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .11$, and the three-way interaction of valence, object, and friend was significant, $F\ (2, 146) = 6.37$, $p < .01$, $\eta^2 = .08$. As shown in Table 2, the mean percentages of positive and negative shared attitudes about person and nonperson objects were highly similar across friends. With each friend, participants reported sharing more negative than positive attitudes about others, *F*s > 21.08, *p*s < .001, η^2s > .22, and more positive than negative nonperson attitudes, *F*s > 27.04,

ps $< .001$, η^2s $> .27$. It appears that the significant three-way interaction was driven primarily by a tendency for participants to share more negative person attitudes and more positive nonperson attitudes with their first-listed friend than with their second- and third-listed friends. Thus, people's first-listed friends carried our predicted effect more strongly than did their remaining friends.

Interestingly, people also rated themselves as closer to their first-listed friends than to their second- and third-listed friends on the single-item index of closeness, Ms $= 4.50$ versus 4.04 versus 3.63, F (2, 82) $= 33.55$, $p < .01$, $\eta^2 = .45$, suggesting that greater interpersonal closeness is characterized by larger percentages of shared negative person attitudes. Importantly, when we entered ratings of closeness to the three friends as covariates in the $2 \times 2 \times 3$ ANOVA described above, the valence-by-object interaction still emerged, F (1, 70) $= 4.29$, $p = .04$, $\eta^2 = .06$, but the three-way interaction was no longer significant, $F < 1$. Controlling for closeness to their three friends, people listed more negative than positive shared attitudes about others, F (1, 70) $= 68.51$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .50$, and more positive than negative shared nonperson attitudes, $F(1, 70) = 126.95$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .66$.

In sum, these findings replicate and extend those obtained in Study 1. Whereas people indicated a strong belief in the intimacy-promoting power of shared positive attitudes about other people, they spontaneously reported more shared negative than positive attitudes about others in the context of their three closest friendships. This effect emerged across all three friendships but appeared strongest for participants' first-listed friends to whom they also felt the closest. As in Study 1, participants also listed more shared positive than negative nonperson attitudes, and those who listed more shared negative attitudes about people tended to list more shared positive attitudes about nonperson objects, r (82) $= .65$, $p < .01$ (see Table 1). Importantly, we attempted to avoid the problems associated with retrospective recall data in Study 2 by querying people about their current shared attitudes. It is reassuring that our primary findings in Studies 1 and 2 were nearly identical, suggesting that shared negative attitudes about others may be important at both early and later stages of friendship.

Study 3

Although consistent with our hypotheses, the findings from Studies 1 and 2 fall short of establishing a causal relation between the discovery of shared negative attitudes about others and interpersonal closeness. That people tend to share a larger percentage of negative than positive attitudes about others with their close friends does not, after all, demonstrate that sharing negative attitudes actually *promotes* closeness. Study 3 was designed to test this causal hypothesis. Participants first indicated both a positive and a negative attitude toward a fictitious target person and then learned that they shared either their positive or their negative attitude about the target with another participant whom they believed they would soon meet. Participants then rated their feelings of closeness to the other participant. We expected people to feel closer to a stranger with whom they shared a negative than a positive attitude about the target person.

In addition, we manipulated the ostensible commonness versus rarity of the shared attitude in Study 3. Based on attribution theory and research (e.g., Jones & Davis, 1965; Kelley, 1973), we reasoned that uncommon (i.e., rarely held) shared attitudes might promote closeness particularly effectively because unexpected behaviors should increase the likelihood of making a dispositional attribution. Thus, upon learning that one shares an attitude with a stranger, one should feel like he knows more about the stranger if the shared attitude is rare (held by few people) than if it is common (held by many people). Finally, we assessed the strength of the attitudes that participants generated about the fictitious target, and we included this variable in analyses to determine whether it moderated the effects of shared attitude valence on closeness. Based on research on attitudinal similarity and liking (e.g., Byrne, 1971; Byrne et al., 1986), we reasoned that the bonding power of shared negative attitudes might be heightened when the shared attitude was one that participants felt strongly about.

Method

Participants and procedure. A total of 31 men and 74 women participated in exchange for credit toward a course requirement. We deleted data from four participants who expressed suspicion about whether an ostensible "other participant" was real, three who were not native English speakers, and one who did not follow instructions. This left 28 men and 69 women in the final sample. Participants ranged from 17 to 40 years in age ($Mdn = 19$), and 79.4% of them identified as White.

Participants were introduced, individually, to a study on impression formation. Upon signing informed consent forms, participants learned that they would be (a) listening to a taped conversation between two strangers and forming impressions of one of the strangers and (b) engaging in a brief "getting to know you" task with another participant who was ostensibly seated next door. For the first task, participants listened to a prerecorded conversation between two fictitious characters named Brad and Melissa. This conversation was intended to mimic a casual interaction between undergraduate acquaintances; topics discussed included grades in a shared class, an upcoming football game, and a possible movie date (see Appendix for the complete script). Before listening to the conversation, participants learned that their task was to form one positive and one negative attitude about Brad. The experimenter explained that participants should identify one specific aspect of Brad's behavior or character that they liked and another specific aspect of his behavior or character that they disliked; she then gave participants an evaluation form on which they wrote down their positive and negative attitudes about Brad "in as much detail as possible" (the order in which participants indicated their positive and negative attitudes was counterbalanced; because order did not moderate any of our effects, we do not mention it further). After describing each attitude, participants rated how strongly they liked (disliked) that particular thing about Brad on scales of 1 (*not at all strongly*) to 9 (*very strongly*).

As a manipulation check, a naive judge rated the attitudes that participants generated about Brad on a scale of 1 (*very negative*) to 9 (*very positive*), with the scale midpoint (5) labeled *neutral*. A second judge rated a subset ($N = 55$; 52%) of the participants' attitudes; interrater reliability was acceptable (intraclass rs $> .67$), so we used only the first judge's ratings. One-sample t tests revealed that people's negative attitudes about Brad ($M = 3.24$) fell well below the "neutral" scale midpoint, $t\ (96) = 18.61$, $p < .001$, whereas their positive attitudes about Brad ($M = 6.69$) fell well above the midpoint, $t\ (96) = 17.32$, $p < .001$. This suggests that participants followed instructions and generated unequivocally positive and negative attitudes about Brad.

After collecting the participant's evaluation form, the experimenter explained that she would return in a moment to provide some information about the future interaction partner; approximately 2 min later, she returned to administer the attitude *valence* and *commonness* manipulations. First, based on random assignment, participants learned that their future partners had expressed either a positive or negative attitude about Brad that was identical to their own. Specifically, the experimenter said "I've looked over the other participant's evaluations of Brad, and I just wanted to let you know that you both identified the same thing that you liked/disliked about Brad"; she then proceeded to paraphrase briefly the participant's positive/negative attitude (e.g., "You both wrote that you liked it when Brad complimented Melissa's appearance"). Note that all participants generated two attitudes about Brad but learned only that they shared *one* of these attitudes with their future partners; the experimenter made no mention of the other nonshared attitude. Second, the experimenter provided information suggesting either that this particular attitude was quite common or rare, depending on condition. In common conditions, she said "Actually, it isn't that unusual for people to mention liking/disliking that particular thing about Brad. In fact, most of the people who have participated in this study have indicated that attitude"; in rare conditions, she said "Actually, it's pretty uncommon for people to mention liking/disliking that particular thing about Brad. In fact,

nobody else who has participated in this study has indicated that attitude."

After administering these two manipulations, the experimenter explained that the interaction task would take place as soon as the participant completed a few final scales, and she gave participants a packet containing our primary dependent measure. On scales of 1 (*not at all*) to 7 (*very much*), participants answered seven questions about their feelings of closeness to their partners. For example, participants indicated "To what extent do you feel close to the other participant?" "To what degree do you think you and the other participant will 'click'?" and "To what extent is the other participant someone with whom you could establish a friendship?" To compute closeness scores, we averaged across these items ($\alpha = .77$).

Next, participants responded to two questions tapping their folk beliefs about the bonding power of shared positive versus negative attitudes. On scales ranging from 1 (*not at all*) to 7 (*never*), participants answered, "In general, to what extent do you feel close to others who share similar likes (dislikes) with you?" The last section of the questionnaire asked participants to jot down any details they recalled about what the experimenter had told them about their future interaction partners, and we coded these open-ended responses for accurate recall of the specific shared attitude. Out of all participants, 89% ($N = 86$) correctly recalled the content of the specific attitude they shared with their future partners; the remaining 11% ($N = 11$) wrote merely that they shared an attitude but did not indicate its content. Including versus excluding the data of participants who did not mention a specific attitude did not change any patterns or significance levels reported below. Finally, participants were debriefed and thanked.

Results and Discussion

Descriptive statistics for and correlations among all variables appear in Table 3. Because participants' gender and race did not moderate any of our effects, we excluded these variables from analyses.

As in Studies 1 and 2, the results of a paired-samples t test on participants' folk beliefs revealed the assumption that sharing positive attitudes promotes closeness more effectively than sharing negative attitudes, Ms = 5.38 and 4.53, t (96) = 6.53, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .31$. Note, however, that we did not ask specifically about shared attitudes *about others* in this study, which limits the conclusions we can draw from this analysis.

Table 3. *Descriptive statistics and intercorrelations among variables in Study 3*

	1	2	3	4
1. PFB	—	.36**	.10	.47**
2. NFB		—	.19	.24*
3. Attitude strength			—	.27*
4. Closeness to partner				—
M	5.38	4.53	4.78	4.24
SD	1.01	1.24	1.50	0.67

Note. Degrees of freedom for all correlations = 95. PFB = positive folk beliefs; NFB = negative folk beliefs.
*$p < .05$. **$p < .01$.

To test our main hypothesis, we conducted a simultaneous multiple regression analysis in which we predicted participants' feelings of closeness from (a) attitude valence (coded as 0, 1), (b) commonness of attitude (coded as 0, 1), (c) strength of shared attitude (zero centered; see Aiken & West, 1991), (d–f) all two-way interactions among predictors, and (g) the three-way interaction term. In line with our prediction, participants who believed they shared a negative attitude about Brad anticipated greater closeness with their partners than did participants who believed they shared a positive attitude about Brad, although this effect only approached significance, $\beta = .27$, t (89) = 1.90, $p = .06$. Also, participants with stronger attitudes toward Brad felt closer to their future partners, $\beta = .77$, t (89) = 2.73, $p < .01$, and attitude commonness was unrelated to perceived closeness, $\beta = .08$, $t < 1$. The two-way interaction between valence and commonness of shared attitude was not significant, $\beta = -.15$, $t < 1$, nor was the three-way interaction, $\beta = .11$, $t < 1$. Thus, counter to our expectations, the ostensible commonness versus rarity of the shared attitude had no

effect on participants' feelings of closeness to their partners.

A significant interaction emerged between attitude valence and attitude strength, $\beta = -.64$, $t\,(89) = 2.56$, $p = .01$. Figure 1 displays the predicted values of closeness for participants who shared positive or negative attitudes about which they felt either very strongly or very weakly (calculated at 1 *SD* above and below the mean). Interestingly, the pattern of scores in Figure 1 shows an effect somewhat different from that expected: Among participants who felt very strongly about their attitude toward Brad, the valence of the shared attitude did not affect their closeness to their partners, $\beta = -.16$, $t < 1$. In contrast, participants with weak attitudes toward Brad displayed the hypothesized pattern, such that those who learned that they shared a negative attitude expected greater closeness to their partners than did those who learned that they shared a positive attitude, $\beta = .70$, $t\,(89) = 3.01$, $p < .01$. Put another way, learning of a shared negative attitude about a third party promoted closeness whether the attitude was strong or weak; learning of a shared *positive* attitude about another person only promoted closeness when the attitude was strongly held.

These findings provide experimental support for our assumptions about the bonding power of shared negative attitudes about others. People who expected to meet a stranger felt closer to this person when they believed that they shared a negative—as opposed to a positive—attitude about a man named Brad. This effect emerged regardless of how common versus rare people believed the shared attitude to be, suggesting that consensus information (Kelley, 1973) did not influence participants' impressions of the stranger. Of course, it is possible that perceived commonness versus rarity of shared attitudes *does* make a difference in promoting closeness between nonintimates but that our manipulation was simply not powerful enough to capture this effect. Additional work is needed before we can draw firm conclusions about the role of consensus information in friendship formation processes.

Attitude strength findings provided additional insight into the nature of the relation between shared attitude valence and closeness: Only when people did *not* feel strongly about the shared evaluation of Brad were negative attitudes more powerful than positive ones. When people learned that they and the stranger shared a strong reaction to Brad, they felt close to the stranger regardless of the attitude's valence. This suggests that the discovery of a shared strong attitude about others is consistently seen as an excellent cue to friendship potential. But, barring such a discovery, those who would be friends may find that friendship proceeds particularly smoothly when it begins with a shared, but mild, dislike of a third party.

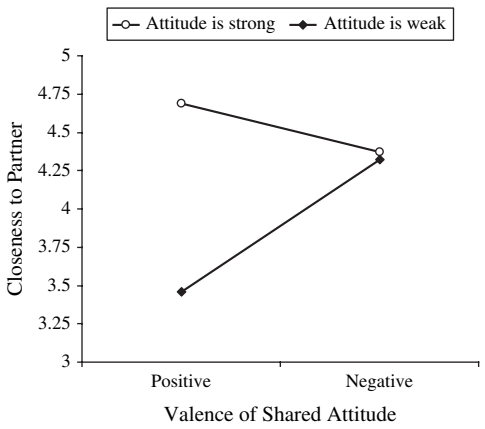

Figure 1. Predicted closeness to partner scores as a function of shared attitude valence and strength (Study 3).

General Discussion

We opened this paper by asking whether the valence of a shared attitude about a third party makes a difference in terms of promoting interpersonal attraction. As Heider (1958) and others (e.g., Aronson & Cope, 1968) have ably demonstrated, both our friend's friend and our enemy's enemy are well positioned to become our friend. Indeed, ample research shows that we like others who are similar to us across a variety of dimensions, whether that similarity lies in our preferences for food, our taste in films, our reactions to art or music, or even our attitudes about the self (Byrne, 1971; Byrne & Nelson, 1965; Newcomb,

1961; Pinel, Long, Landau, & Pyszczynski, 2004; Swann, De La Ronde, & Hixon, 1994; Swann & Pelham, 2002). Here, taking into account recent theory and research on the relative power of "bad" over "good" information, we proposed that sharing a dislike of another person should facilitate closeness more powerfully than sharing a liking for that person.

The findings from the studies reported here are consistent with this assumption. In Studies 1 and 2, when listing the positive and negative attitudes that they shared with their closest friends, people recalled a larger proportion of shared negative than positive attitudes about others. This effect maintained—with remarkable similarity across studies—whether people recalled the shared attitudes they discovered early on in their friendships or those that they currently held in common. Study 3 provided experimental evidence of the relative strength of shared negative over positive attitudes about others in promoting closeness: People who learned that they and a stranger had a mutual dislike of a target person felt closer to this stranger than people who learned that they shared a liking for the target. Taken together, these findings provide converging support for our valence hypothesis.

Several additional findings deepened our understanding of our primary finding. First, although we made no predictions about the percentages of positive versus negative *non*-person attitudes that people share with their closest friends, Studies 1 and 2 showed a consistent tendency for close friends to recall far more positive than negative attitudes about nonperson objects. Indeed, positive nonperson attitudes constituted the clear majority of shared attitudes in the first two studies (see Table 2, Column 3). Furthermore, in both studies, people who listed greater percentages of shared negative person attitudes also listed greater percentages of shared positive nonperson attitudes (rs = .50 and .65). The strength and robustness of this association hints at a picture of friendship formation in which nonintimates bond over the discovery of a few shared dislikes of specific individuals or social groups embedded in a larger network of shared likes for various inanimate "objects" such as life philosophies, hobbies, ideas, and so forth.

One possible reason for this pattern might be that the discovery of relatively many mutual, positive reactions to the world fosters a sense of familiarity that promotes closeness (Byrne & Nelson, 1965; Pinel et al., 2004) and makes further self-disclosure likely (Altman & Taylor, 1973). With added self-disclosure comes the discovery of a small number of shared negative attitudes about other people, which serves to hasten considerably the growth of closeness. Another possible explanation is that the initial discovery of a small number of shared dislikes of other people serves somehow to "open the floodgates" of attitude sharing, as perhaps occurred in our Study 3. Since most attitudes pertain to things *other than* specific individuals or groups and impression management concerns inhibit the expression of unpleasant sentiments among strangers, two nonintimates who initially bond over a shared dislike of another person are bound to discover a relatively large number of shared positive attitudes about nonperson things. Unfortunately, the current findings do not shed any light on the direction of the relation between shared negative person attitudes and shared positive nonperson attitudes, so we must leave this question to be addressed in future research.

Second, although the findings from Study 3 provided support for our hypothesis about the relative bonding power of shared dislikes over likes, they also pointed to a clear moderator of this effect: Only when the shared attitude about Brad was weak did its valence influence people's closeness to their future interaction partners. When people discovered that they and a stranger shared a *strong* attitude about Brad, they felt close to this stranger whether the attitude was positive or negative. Given, however, that the discovery of strongly held shared attitudes may take some time in a new friendship, our findings show that people may facilitate intimacy by contriving weakly held shared negative attitudes about other persons. Such weak negative attitudes about others may serve to "test the waters" before interactants reach the stage at which they are willing and/or able to offer more personal, strongly held beliefs.

Note how consistent the emerging picture is with a model that emphasizes the role of negative gossip in friendship formation. We

certainly do not deny that gossip behavior has its drawbacks or that bad-mouthing others can hurt feelings, create conflicts, and "stir up a cauldron of trouble" (Rosnow, 2001, p. 203). Indeed, some researchers are beginning to conceptualize gossip as a form of indirect aggression that can have harmful consequences for both gossipers and gossipees alike (Foster, 2004; Richardson & Green, 1997). Still, if there is a positive side of gossip, we believe it is that shared, mild, negative attitudes toward others can create and/or amplify interpersonal intimacy. As noted by Dunbar (2004, p. 100), gossip may be "the core of human social relationships."

Given the consistency and strength of our findings, there are several future directions for this line of research. First, although we theorized about the mechanisms that drive the effects of shared negative attitudes on interpersonal closeness, our investigations did not include a direct assessment of these mechanisms. According to our logic, shared negative attitudes about others should facilitate closeness because they (a) foster feelings of connectedness and self-esteem by establishing a "we" that is superior to the "they" represented by the disliked other (Tajfel & Turner, 1979) and (b) provide interactants with (real or perceived) greater insight into one another's dispositions (Kelley, 1973). Clearly, it is only through additional research that we will know whether one, both, or neither of these proposed mechanisms drives the effect we observed here. If sharing negative attitudes promotes intimacy because it boosts people's self-esteem at the expense of the disliked other, we should observe elevated levels of state self-esteem among people who discover a shared negative, as opposed to a positive, attitude about a third party. Alternatively, if sharing negative attitudes promotes intimacy because it reveals something personal about the sharer, we would expect people to make more dispositional attributions about a stranger with whom they share a negative, as compared to a positive, attitude about a third party. Both of these possibilities represent fruitful avenues for future work.

Another logical step in this line of research involves manipulating both attitude valence and whether or not attitudes are shared. Based on the interpersonal attraction literature, we took it as given that shared attitudes—regardless of valence—promote closeness more effectively than do nonshared attitudes; therefore we focused exclusively on the differential effects of positive versus negative shared attitudes. Nonetheless, inclusion of the shared/nonshared dimension in future work might yield some interesting findings. For example, the current work shows that when attitudes about others are shared (and weakly held), negative attitudes promote closeness more effectively than do positive attitudes. When attitudes are not shared, however, Folkes and Sears' (1977) findings suggest that people will feel closer to strangers who reveal positive, as compared to negative, attitudes about others. Thus, revealing negative attitudes may actually *repel*, rather than attract, strangers who do not share the negative attitude in question. In this sense, revealing negative attitudes about others may involve an interpersonal gamble: If the attitude is shared, the payoffs are great; if the attitude is not shared, the attitude revealer stands to make a rather unfavorable impression on potential friends.

Finally, it would be desirable in future work to use a naturalistic, longitudinal design to track the role of shared negative attitudes about others in friendship formation across time. Such a design would allow for firm conclusions regarding our valence hypothesis, while circumventing the problems associated with retrospective recall methodologies like the ones used here in Studies 1 and 2.

We close with a comment about what is, from our perspective, one of the most interesting findings presented here—the inaccuracy of people's folk beliefs about the power of shared negative versus positive attitudes about others. Whether people truly believe that they bond more easily over shared likes than dislikes, or merely exhibited a socially desirable response bias, they consistently underestimated the intimacy-promoting properties of shared negative attitudes about others. Based on the work reported here, it appears that people's folk theories about friendship formation are amiss. Although shared positive attitudes are indeed important in promoting friendship, there seems to be something especially delicious about the

process of sharing our grievances about other people.

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Appendix

Script for Interaction (Study 3)

Brad: Hey Melissa.

Melissa: Oh, hi Brad.

Brad: You look really nice today.

Melissa: Thanks. What's up with you?

Brad: Nothing much. So what did you think about lecture?

Melissa: Oh, it was all right, I mean, whatever. I don't really like that class that much.

Brad: Yeah, I know, me neither. It's like my least favorite class out of all my classes. But I'm still getting an 'A' somehow.

Melissa: Really? I think I'm getting a 'C' or something. I swear, I never study for that class.

Brad: Well, I usually make really good grades. So, uh, do you have any plans for the weekend?

Melissa: I don't know, I'll probably go to the football game. What about you?

Brad: Dude! No way would I miss the game. I've been to like every game this year.

Melissa: Yeah, totally; I only missed one so far, but that was okay because OU lost that one anyway.

Brad: So, um, are you going with somebody?

Melissa: Yeah, I'm probably going with my friends I guess.

Brad: Yeah, me too. Do you have plans for after the game? 'Cause I was thinking that maybe we could do something, hang out or chill or whatnot.

Melissa: Yeah, I mean, I have to check what my friends are doing, but that might be cool. Maybe we could go see a movie or get something to eat.

Brad: Hey, I've been wanting to see that movie *The Chill Factor*. Have you heard of it?

Melissa: Um, I think so. I'm not really sure—what's it about?

Brad: It's about this guy who drives an ice cream truck, and he has to take this bomb somewhere, and the bomb can't drop below a certain temperature or else it'll explode.

Melissa: Wow, that sounds kind of like that movie *Speed*, where the bus would explode if they drove less than like fifty miles an hour or something.

Brad: So you think you'd be into seeing it?

Melissa: Yeah, probably, that sounds good. Maybe I should write down my phone number so you can call me.

Brad: Cool.