

Reward theory of attraction

The **reward theory of attraction** states that people like those whose behavior is rewarding to them or whom they associate with rewarding events.^[1] More clearly stated this means people are attracted to those who in some way make them feel good, or are attracted to those who remind them of people that they enjoy being around.

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Effects on attraction

We are attracted to those that we find it satisfying and gratifying to be with.^[1] If a relationship gives us more reward and pleasure than cost and pain, we will like that relationship and wish it to continue. Thus, even after a relationship ends, we may find ourselves drawn to people that remind us of the former person.

This can help explain why no love can feel quite the same as that "first". These "firsts" can generate sensations so new and unfamiliar that the experience feels almost unreal.^[2] Besides emotional engagement, these experiences also have a heavy dose of novelty. Novelty simply driving up dopamine and norepinephrine (brain systems associated with focus and paying attention and rewards). A first romantic relationship is the only time in which an individual is in "love" without ever having been hurt from such a relationship. If a person meets someone who reminds them of an ex, whether physically or a similarity in attitudes, gestures, voice, or interests, it may engage the representation in their memory. And since their first love, by result of its novelty and emotional significance, is potentially the most prominent, it may be the representation that is summoned when they meet a potential someone new, which effects the way they see that new relationship. Their old feelings, motivations, and expectations are all transferred into their memory, which can cause them to (if their new found partner reminds them of an ex) begin to repeat behaviors that they engaged in with that ex.

The fact that people are attracted to those who make them feel good can also explain why people are attracted to those they cannot have. Forbidden love is the most intense. Again, dopamine plays a major role. Beyond pleasure, dopamine is also associated with focus, motivation, and goal-oriented behavior. When a person cannot get somebody, the dopamine system keeps on spitting out hormones, providing the adrenaline, focus and motivation necessary to keep trying.^[3]

Other influences explained

The reward theory also helps explain why people are more attracted to people of close proximity, of more attractiveness, more similar, and people who have feelings of mutuality. Proximity is rewarding. It cost less effort to receive friendship's benefits with someone who lives or works closer. People like attractive people because they perceive that attractive people offer other desirable traits, and they benefit from associating with them. If others have similar opinions as ourselves we feel rewarded because we presume that they like us in return. People also like to be liked and love to be loved. Therefore, liking is usually mutual because we like those who like us in return.

Original research

Pawel Lewicki (1985)

Conditioning creates positive feelings towards things and people linked with rewarding events.^[1] Pawel Lewicki in 1985 tested this liking-by-association principle by conducting an experiment on students at the University of Warsaw. In the experiment students were given the option of choosing which of two pictured women (woman A or woman B) looked friendlier. Students were 50-50 in choosing which was friendlier. Other students, however, before viewing the pictures interacted with a warm and friendly experimenter who resembled woman A, chose woman A at a margin of 6 to 1. In a follow up study, the experimenter acted unfriendly toward half of the participants. When these participants later had to turn in their data to one of the two women, they almost always avoided the one who looked like the "unfriendly" experimenter.

Griffit (1970)

In Griffit's study college students that evaluated strangers in a pleasant room liked them better than students who evaluated strangers in an uncomfortably hot room.

Recent research

Helen Fisher (Yale University)

Helen Fisher and colleagues conducted a neuroimaging study on men and women that had just "fallen madly in love". Using functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI), they collected data on 10 women and 7 men that reported being in love an average of 7.4 months. Each participant was shown a picture of their loved one as well as a photograph of an emotionally neutral person, each viewing was then followed by a distraction task to cleanse the mind of strong emotions. Brain activation with the picture of the loved one was high in the region of the brain that produces and distributes dopamine and also brains "reward system", or the neural network associated with pleasure, arousal, focus, and motivation.^[4]

Gingrich, Liu, Cascio, Wang, and Insel (2000)

In 2000 animal studies were conducted that supported that attraction is associated with elevated activity in central dopamine. In the experiment a female lab-raised prairie vole was mated with a male, and formed a distinct preference for him associated with a 50% increase of dopamine. When a dopamine antagonist was injected into the reward region of the brain, she no longer had the preference for the male.^[4]

Helen Fisher (2005)

In 2005 Fisher and colleagues conducted a second fMRI study in which participants were still in love with a past partner. The study included 10 women and 5 men. The rejected participants viewed pictures of their ex and of a similar, emotionally neutral individual. Within the participants dopamine was again increased with viewing of the photographs.^[4]

References

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