

29th March 2004

Interpersonal Relationships

Qa) Describe the research studies relating to Interpersonal attraction (12)

Psychologists as reasons why one individual is attracted to another have listed a number of factors. Surprisingly proximity is cited as a major component in the development of relationships. Festinger et al found in a study of married graduate students, that close friends who lived in the same building were twice as likely to be living on the same floor as living on another. All the graduate students had been assigned their housing randomly therefore this suggests that the frequency of meetings between individuals has a big effect on the relationship. Bossard study of marriages in Philadelphia supported this theory. He found that out of 5000 marriage licenses there was a clear tendency for the couples to love close together.

The matching hypothesis suggests that people be attracted to those who match them in terms of intelligence and good looks. A follow up study to Walster et al's original 'computer dance' supported the matching hypothesis. In this experiment students were invited to a college dance where they would be set up with other students at random. When signing up to the dance all students were graded on physical attractiveness. Walster and Walster found that if the students meet beforehand, giving them more time to think about the qualities they were looking for in a partner, students tended to like partners who were the same level of physical attractiveness as them. This supports the matching hypothesis. Murstein (1972) used photos of couples to test the matching hypothesis. The findings demonstrated a clear pattern of similar levels of attractiveness between couples.

Qb) Evaluate the studies you described in part a.

The studies on proximity in relation to the development of relationships have shown that people are more likely to become lovers if they live close together. However these studies can be criticised for ignoring other antagonistic relationships that can develop. Ebbesen, Kjos and Konecni (1976) found that most of the enemies of residents in apartment blocks in California tended to live close by. Bossard's study of couples living in Philadelphia can be criticised for being out of date. Since the 1930s when the study was conducted we have become far more mobile with increasing

cars on the road. Today there is also cheaper and easier accesses to a wider variety of communications for example telephoning and e-mailing, therefore proximity may not play such a large role in attraction.

Walster and Walster's study of the 'computer dance' can be criticised on a number of levels. Firstly the situation was highly unusual and unrealistic as the dates were assigned and the students were asked to write down the opinions of their dates very soon after meeting them so only superficial opinions could be made. Also it is important to remember that all participants were students and therefore not looking for deep and meaningful relationships but short flings therefore the results may not be representative of the whole of society. Finally the problem with both Walster and Walster and Murnstein studies is that the participant's physical attractiveness must be measured and noted. Not only does this have ethical repercussions of how the participant will feel being judged on their looks but it is also unreliable as everyone has different opinions on what is and what isn't attractive. Therefore who is to say that the four independent judges in Walster and Walster's studies have the same opinions of everyone else?

Qc) Discuss psychological research into 'electronic friendships/relationships' (24)

A new medium of communication has exploded into our lives, the Internet. Used for everything from gambling to business deals, the most interesting area for psychologists is the rise in interpersonal relationships formed and developed over the Internet.

For many that conduct these 'Cyberaffairs' Internet dating is just as valid and meaningful as relationships based on face-to-face interaction. Hultin (1993) found that like in real life individuals seek people with similar characteristics as themselves, to engage in small talk over the Internet. However if they find that there are significant differences in attitudes and interests then they are likely to cease communication. McKenna and Yael (1999) supported the view that to those based in an Internet based relationship feel that it is as intimate as a 'traditional' one. However McKenna and Yael suggested that Internet relationships form more easily and develop quicker than 'normal' relationships. This may be due to the fact that individuals who use the Internet to make friends or partners tend to be more socially anxious and lonely and therefore more open to a relationship. A laboratory experiment by McKenna and Yael found that people tend to be more attracted to who they are talking to if it is over the Internet in comparison with face-to-face conversations.

The advantages of Internet dating is obvious to many users, described as the 'Ultimate safe sex' (Branwyn), the Internet

provides easy access, affordability and anonymity (Griffiths). Internet dating is advantageous in that it is the meeting of minds rather than bodies therefore the relationships tend to be less superficial. Cyberaffairs have the ability to heighten such factors as proximity, rapport, similarity and mutual self-disclosure while downplaying physical attributes (Cooper and Sportolari).

Of course a consequent of the lack of physicality in these relationships causes a lot of mistrust over the Internet, with one user never being entirely sure who they are talking to. An extreme example of this is the paedophiles who prey on young children over the Internet often pretending to be young children themselves. Another example is that of John Herbert who found that many men enjoyed to chat up others while pretending to be women. Psychological studies have found that in general Internet users tend to convey a more idealised version of themselves to others over the Internet.

Problems with Internet relationships are apparent when one looks into the intricacies of actual physical interaction. Psychologists have found that much of the communicative methods used in conversations are in fact non-verbal but conveyed through body language and tone of voice. Usually non-verbal communication is sub-conscious therefore it is harder to interpret someone's true feelings. To compensate regular Internet users have developed their own language to illustrate their feelings, for example the abbreviations LOL(laugh out loud), JJ (just joking) and IALIAF (I ain't laughing it ain't funny).

When assessing Internet relationships and its future as a method of meeting people it is important to remember that the constraints that Internet dating may intern exist with other means of communication as well. The telephone and postal service have long been used as modes of starting and maintaining sexual relationships and friendships. Consequently it is likely that with the Internet the positives will out weigh the negatives and continue to be used by millions around the world.

Walster et al tested this hypothesis by inviting students to a dance. When the students arrived to sign up for the dance four independent judges marked them on their physical appearance as a measure of social desirability. The students were then asked to fill out a questionnaire, two days later the dance was held and students were randomly paired together. During the dance students were required to fill out another questionnaire on the dance and their date. The results showed the less attractive students liked the more physically attractive students more, this study therefore contradicts the matching hypothesis. Physical attractiveness was found to be by far the most important indicator of whether the students would meet up again, overshadowing personality and intelligence.