

## **Sensation Seeking as a Determinant of Interpersonal Attraction Toward Similar and Dissimilar Others**

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While greater attraction is generally expressed toward individuals with similar rather than dissimilar beliefs, there are circumstances under which people are more attracted to dissimilar others. The present research was conducted to determine whether individual differences in sensation seeking would differentially influence judgments of attraction toward similar and dissimilar others within a social interaction context. It was predicted, and found, that high sensation seekers were more attracted to dissimilar others than were low sensation seekers, who instead showed greater relative attraction toward similar others. Further, high sensation seekers more frequently preferred discussing mutually disagreed upon topics with a prospective partner, whereas low sensation seekers preferred mutually agreed upon topics.

It has often been demonstrated that greater attraction and/or desire to affiliate is expressed in many situations toward individuals whose beliefs and opinions are similar than between those whose beliefs and opinions are dissimilar to our own (e.g., Byrne, 1961, 1971; Byrne & Nelson, 1965; Clore, 1976; Mehrabian, 1975). Byrne (1966) explained this common finding by suggesting that the dissimilarity of the other person creates an aroused, stressful state which the individual is motivated to either reduce or avoid; hence the preference for those who do not provoke it, namely, similar others.

There are, however, instances of mitigation of the similarity-attraction relationship where people show a preference to affiliate with dissimilar others (e.g., Ajzen, 1974; Fromkin, 1972; Leonard, 1975; Lerner & Agar, 1972; Novak & Lerner, 1968; Russ, Gold, & Stone, 1979; Taylor & Mettee, 1971). For example, Russ, et al. (1979) noted that, following the induction of cognitive uncertainty brought about through confusing, ambiguous film stimuli, subjects expressed a greater desire to affiliate with a dissimilar other. Presumably the dissimilar other was viewed as a means of obtaining a different perspective on the ambiguous stimuli and thus would help individuals resolve their cognitive uncertainty.

Mehrabian (1975) also considered the possibility that people would consider dissimilar others as a sources of diverse information and would

prefer to associate with them for their informational and arousal-provoking qualities. Investigating the relationship between personality differences in arousal-seeking and attraction to similar/dissimilar others, he failed to detect any difference among high or low arousal-seekers' inclination to associate with dissimilar others. Mehrabian's arousal seeking scale however, was constructed as a global measure, incorporating several different arousal-seeking components from existing personality scales, such as change seeking, stimulus seeking, and sensation seeking (Mehrabian & Russell, 1974, p. 31). In light of arguments that global personality traits are not effective predictors of behavior for specific situations (Bem & Allen, 1974; Mischel, 1968), it is not surprising that Mehrabian did not find differences between high and low arousal seekers in their preference to affiliate with individuals who held discrepant attitudes. Therefore, in order to increase predictive capability in the present study, we decided to differentiate between high and low sensation seekers on the basis of selected items from the Sensation Seeking Scale (Zuckerman, Eysenck, & Eysenck, 1978) that are appropriate to interpersonal situations.

With regard to the relationship between sensation-seeking and arousal, research shows that high sensation seekers generally react to threatening situations with minimal levels of negative arousal (Blankstein, 1975; Segal, 1973). Segal (1973) points out further that high sensation seekers may even interpret such situations positively, as ones involving the possibility of new adventures and challenges. Thus, high sensation seekers may react to situations in which they are to meet highly dissimilar others as potentially exciting and challenging and not as threatening in comparison with low sensation seekers. We, therefore, predicted that high sensation seekers would express greater attraction toward a dissimilar other than would low sensation seekers. In contrast, we expected that low sensation seekers would prefer a similar other more than high sensation seekers. Furthermore, high sensation seekers were expected to experience more positive affect when anticipating being paired with a dissimilar other in comparison with low sensation seekers, but low sensation seekers relative to high sensation seekers were expected to experience more positive feelings toward a similar other. Finally, we predicted that, when given an opportunity to select topics for later discussion, high sensation seekers would be more inclined to select a topic with which they and their partner were in disagreement, irrespective of their attitude similarity/dissimilarity, while low sensation seekers would prefer the relative safety of a topic in mutual agreement.

## Method

### *Subjects*

Introductory psychology students, 72 males and 65 females, participated in the experiment to fulfill a course requirement.

### *Instrumentation*

*Survey of Attitudes.* To manipulate perceived attitude similarity, a ten-item attitudinal questionnaire (Russ, et al., 1979) was utilized on which subjects responded to such topics as a belief in God, the value of war, birth control, the American way of life, sports, drug laws, money, student needs, social aspects of college life, and premarital sex. Each topic was followed by a series of six statements with which to express strong belief in or acceptance of (6) to strong disbelief or rejection (1).

*Sensation Seeking Scale.* The Sensation Seeking Scale (Zuckerman, et al., 1978) consisted of 40 forced-choice items depicting interests, preferences, and behaviors related to arousal, variety, and novelty in experience. For each item, one alternative entails some aspect of the need for arousal, novelty, and variety (e.g., "When you can predict almost everything a person will do or say, s/he must be a bore."), while the other expresses an aversion to such ("I dislike people who do or say things just to shock or upset others"). Nine items<sup>1</sup> which applied to interpersonal situations were subsequently selected and subject responses were then summed to produce a situational-specific sensation seeking score for each subject.

*Interpersonal Judgment Scale.* The Interpersonal Judgment Scale (Byrne & Nelson, 1965) allowed subjects to evaluate their prospective partners on a variety of dimensions (e.g., intelligence, similarity, morality, adjustment, etc.) from very positive (7) to very negative (1). The average of two items, the degree to which the subject looked forward to working in the experiment with this other person and to what extent the subject would like him/her, served as the dependent measure of attraction.

*Affective Assessment.* Six bipolar adjective sets (Byrne & Clore, 1970; Krivonos, Byrne, & Friedrich, 1976) describing an individual's affective state were presented for the subject to indicate his/her current feelings along 7-point continua. The sets were: happy-sad, pleasant-unpleasant, negative-positive, comfortable-uncomfortable, bad-good, and high-low. Item responses, scored from 1 to 7, were summed to produce an affective score for each subject which could range from 6 to 42.

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<sup>1</sup>A complete list of the items used is available from the authors. One of the items was slightly reworded to eliminate an obvious heterosexual connotation.

### *Procedure*

Informed that the study dealt with impression formation and social interaction, subjects (in groups averaging six) were told that the first of two sessions would entail completing a variety of survey measures. Included among these were the Survey of Attitudes and Sensation Seeking Scale. This phase completed, subjects were told they would be randomly paired with another student of the same sex who had previously participated in the study for a second session during which they would be expected to discuss various topics (in actuality, no second session occurred). They were further informed that they would receive advance information concerning their future partners prior to actually meeting them.

A Survey of Attitudes, ostensibly completed by the prospective partner, was then given to each subject in order to manipulate attitudinal similarity/disimilarity. The measure was actually completed by the experimenter using the subjects's survey as a model. According to the similarity condition a subject had randomly been assigned to, the attitude survey of the bogus other was completed so that s/he appeared to agree on either 60% or 30% (high or low similarity, respectively) of the topics selected at random. Agreement on a particular topic consisted of indicating the bogus other as having the exact opinion as the subject on that item, whereas disagreement utilized the polar-opposite attitudinal response.

After looking over their future partner's attitude survey, subjects completed the Interpersonal Judgment Scale. They were then informed that they could select a preferred topic of discussion for the next session from among the Survey of Attitude items. Subjects then responded to the affective assessment measure. Rather than debrief at this time and risk dissemination of the bogus other strategy to future participants, subjects were told they would be notified of the later discussion session and were dismissed. While direct assessment of suspicions was not attempted, subjects' comments, concerned primarily with scheduling of the second session, suggested no evidence of such. Data collection was completed within two weeks and subjects were sent a debriefing letter and invited to come by for further discussion should they so desire.

### **Results**

Inter-item reliability among the situational-specific sensation-seeking items, determined by Cronbach's alpha, was .54. An initial 2-way ANOVA<sup>2</sup> (sex of subject X similar/dissimilar other) indicated that

<sup>2</sup>To accommodate unequal cell sizes, all ANOVAs employed a multiple regression solution assessing main and interaction effects simultaneously. Each effect is the unique contribution to the explained variation after adjusting for all other effects (Nie, N.H., Hull, C.H., Jenkins, J.G., Steinbrenner, K., & Bent, D.H., *Statistical package for the social sciences*. New York: McGraw-Hill, 1975, pp. 418-419).

sensation-seeking levels did not differ between similarity conditions,  $F(1,133) < 1$ , *n.s.*, and that males and females did not significantly differ from one another in their sensation-seeking propensity,  $F(1,133) = 2.44$ ,  $p > .09$ . High and low sensation-seeking conditions were differentiated on the basis of a mean split.

### *Manipulation Check*

A 3-way ANOVA (subjects' sex X sensation seeking X similarity condition) was conducted on an item from the Interpersonal Judgment Scale regarding the perceived similarity of the partner ("I believe this person is very similar (6)/dissimilar (1) to myself"). Attitudinal similarity appeared to have been effectively manipulated between high (mean=4.16) and low (mean=2.19) similarity conditions,  $F(1,129) = 17.50$ ,  $p < .001$ . No appreciable differences were attributable to subjects' sex or level of sensation seeking ( $F_s < 1$ ), nor were there any significant interactions.

### *Affective Response*

A 3-way analysis of the mood assessment (coefficient alpha=.91) revealed no significant main effects attributable to subjects' sex ( $F < 2$ ), sensation-seeking propensity ( $F < 1$ ), or attitudinal similarity of the partner ( $F < 1$ ), nor were there any significant interactions.

### *Attraction Toward Other*

The index of attraction (inter-item correlation,  $r = .85$ ) toward the bogus other was also analyzed in a 3-way ANOVA. A strong similarity-attraction effect was evident,  $F(1,129) = 25.18$ ,  $p < .001$ , with greater overall attraction expressed toward the similar (mean=5.04) rather than dissimilar (mean=3.77) other. No main effect for subjects' sex or sensation seeking was evident ( $F_s < 1$ ). However, as predicted, an interaction between sensation seeking and attitude similarity did occur,  $F(1,129) = 3.92$ ,  $p < .05$ . An analysis of simple main effects indicated that high sensation seekers (mean=4.12,  $n=37$ ) expressed significantly greater liking for the dissimilar other than did low sensation seekers (mean=3.01,  $n=31$ ),  $F(1,129) = 11.11$ ,  $p < .001$ . The difference in attraction expressed by high sensation seekers (mean=4.80,  $n=40$ ) relative to low sensation seekers (mean=5.38,  $n=29$ ) toward the similar other approached significance in the predicted direction,  $F(1,129) = 3.40$ ,  $p < .06$ . No other interactions were found.

### *Choice of Discussion Topic*

The frequency with which subjects selected a topic over which they and their prospective partner disagreed was analyzed in a 3-way chi-square analysis (Winer, 1971, pp. 855-859). There was a strong tendency on the

part of the high sensation seekers (77%) to select a discordant topic relative to low sensation seekers (23%),  $\chi^2=27.16$ ,  $p<.001$ . Neither subjects' sex nor the similarity of the expected partner appeared to make any difference in choosing a topic (both  $\chi^2s<1$ ) and no interactions were evidenced.

### Discussion

The present experiment offers evidence of the moderating influence of an individual's sensation-seeking inclination in attraction toward similar and dissimilar others within a social interaction context. High sensation seekers appeared more attracted to a dissimilar other with whom they were expecting to interact than did low sensation seekers, while low sensation seekers were more attracted to someone similar to themselves than were high sensation seekers. The dissimilarity of the bogus other to the high sensation seeker could be considered a source of novel experience, hence the greater relative attraction. These findings are congruent with the notion that the high sensation seeker has a greater propensity to engage in activities and situations that offer more novel, complex, varied, or intense levels of stimulation (Kirk & Donneworth, 1972; Segal, 1973; Zuckerman, 1978) than the low sensation seekers.

Although Krivonos, Byrne & Friedrich (1976) reported subjects to express more positive affect when paired with a similar other rather than a dissimilar other, the affective responses in the present study suggested no differential influence attributable either to the similarity of the partner or the subjects' sensation-seeking propensity as had been anticipated. Perhaps the lack of such differences was caused by the fact that the interpersonal context used in this study was impersonal, with subjects only being allowed to anticipate but not actually interact with other subjects.

Further evidence of the sensation-seeking motive was revealed by the frequency with which a disputed topic was selected as a preferred topic of discussion with the similar/dissimilar partner. The obvious preference among high sensation seekers for discordant topics could be interpreted as a positive anticipation by them of the greater novelty and challenge inherent in a disputed topic, expecting it to lead to more intense interaction than would discussion of an agreed-upon topic. Conversely, considering that a disagreed-upon topic may lead to more argumentative discourse, low sensation seekers may have opted for the greater safety of a mutually agreed-upon topic, thereby reducing the prospect of confrontation. Whether high sensation seekers in interpersonal situations are guided by information-seeking motives or simply by sensation-seeking motives is not obvious from the present results, but such a consideration does suggest a direction for further research.

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