Similarity in Mate Selection and Courtship Progress: The Use of Self and Other-Perceptions

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The role of similarity in the mate selection/courtship progress area is examined. A brief history of the use of similarity and the problems associated with its use are discussed, low to modest relations, unusable relations, no clear view of how similarity operates in relationship development. It is proposed that a possible explanation for the problem lies in the ways in which similarity is measured. A comparison of self perceptions is the more dominant assessment technique, but evidence form social interaction theory and the social psychological literature on person perception suggests that such comparisons may be inappropriate. A comparison of self- and other-perceptions may be a more appropriate method of assessment, but has its own problems. The literature in this area is reviewed and directions for future research are suggested.

Mate selection and courtship progress (MS/CP) have been major topics of discussion and research in the area of family studies for approximately four decades now. Together they make up an area for which there is a great deal of empirical and theoretical work from a number of different perspectives. One common thread that can be found running throughout the MS/CP literature, however, is that of similarity. Early work in the area focused on propinquity, a variable which served to ensure similarity on social variables (i.e., race, religion, education, SES). Building on the propinquity studies, the study of similarity came to be more direct as researchers assessed homogamy on various attitudes, personality traits, and needs.

Winch's theory of complementary needs (1954) shifted the focus of study to the search for a mate opposite and complementary to oneself (Adams, 1979), setting off roughly two decades of discussion on the nature of complementarity, its assessment, and its place in the mate selection process (for a brief discussion, see White & Hatcher, 1984). Levinger (1964) argued that conceptualizations of similarity and complementarity as mutually exclusive were erroneous—that needs that were similar in type and level were complementary as well. While no one has suggested that complementarity be viewed as

* An earlier version of this paper was presented at the Pre-Conference Workshop on Theory Construction and Research Methodology, Annual meeting of the National Council on Family Relations, Dearborn, Michigan, November, 1986. Special thanks to Drs. Karen S. Wampler, Sharon Price, Anthony Jurich, and Constance Shehan for comments on earlier drafts of this paper. James E. Deal is in the Department of Psychology, University of Virginia, Charlottesville, Va.

Key words: other-perceptions; mate-selection; courtship progress.

a special case of similarity, it does not seem illogical to do so, since complementarity ignores differences on needs that are orthogonal to one another (high need to dominate and high need not to be dominated, for example). In any case, the evidence for complementarity has been inconsistent enough to demonstrate the need for still more work on the subject (Adams, 1979).

As researchers in the field turned away from the single variable approaches and toward the more process-oriented ones (Murstein, 1970), similarity was still found to play a major role. Kerckhoff and Davis (1962), in developing their "filter theory", investigated both homogamy and complementarity. In this theory the field of eligibles is initially narrowed on the basis of similarity of social attributes, while subsequent selection is made on the basis of similarity of values and needs, and finally on complementarity. Lewis (1972) proposed a Premarital Dyadic Formation theory which emphasized the process by which casually dating couples became premarital dyads. Similar to Kerckhoff and Davis (1962), the first stage in this process is the perception of similarity of social characteristics, values, interests, and personality traits. Murstein (1973) proposed the Stimulus-Value-Role theory of mate selection, another developmental approach. Tests of this theory demonstrated the importance of similarity in both the stimulus and the role stages. Finally, Adams (1979), in his theoretical model, included similarity of attractiveness, values, and personalities among his propositions.

The data substantiating the role of similarity in the MS/CP area have been inconsistent to the degree that the need for additional work is evident (Adams, 1979). The purpose of this paper, then, is to investigate the role of similarity through:

1. Reviewing the role that similarity plays in MS/CP;
2. Discussing two possible techniques for assessing similarity;
3. Proposing new research directions for the study of similarity in MS/CP.

THE ROLE OF SIMILARITY

The emphasis on the concept of similarity is understandable. From a social psychological perspective, empirical evidence points to the importance of similarity in affective relationships. In general, people tend to like those whom they see as being similar in attitudes and interests (Trost, 1967). While validating the self and promoting emotional satisfaction, the perception of similarity leads to rewarding interaction which leads to liking (Coombs, 1966).

The study of similarity, then, is an understandable and logical basis for theories that deal with the establishment of an intimate relationship. The issue of similarity is not, however, without its detractors. Bolton (1961) argued that the correlations on social-psychological variables for marital partners were very low. Murstein (1967), while pointing out that such correlations were significant, argued that they were not high enough to be of practical use. Thirteen years later (1980), however, Murstein concluded that similarity had at least some impact on all variables studied, but that its influence was least in the areas of personality and personality adequacy. Stephen (1985), reviewing the sequence theories of mate selection, stated that, while the importance of similarity of beliefs, attitudes, and values has been established in a number of studies, attempts to predict relationship development have been either inconclusive or unreplicated. "Research has failed to provide solid evidence of how similarity operates in the development of intimacy" (p. 956). The reason for the lack of research support is not immediately clear, but the circular nature of the question is one explanation.
immediately clear. Stephen investigates similarity in the context of fixed sequence vs. circular causal models of relationship development. Another possible explanation lies in the ways in which similarity has been assessed.

THE MEASUREMENT OF SIMILARITY

Self-Self Perceptions

In much of the literature, similarity has been measured by assessing and comparing the self-perceptions of the individuals involved. Research participants respond to certain instruments designed either to evaluate themselves on certain traits/characteristics/needs, or to determine what values they hold in certain areas. These evaluations assess how the individuals view themselves and are statistically analyzed to determine the nature of the relationship between the two individuals: complementary, homogamous, leading/not leading to good courtship progress, etc. Comparisons between self-perceptions (A's perception of A and B's perception of B; or A(A) and B(B)) may be conceptualized as assessments of agreement or congruence of perceptions and have a long history of use in the field.

Self-/Other-Perceptions

A prevalent sub-theme in the MS/CP area has been the use of self- and other-perceptions. In this case, assessments are made of how the individual sees him/herself [A(A) and B(B)] as well as how he/she sees the partner [A(B) and B(A)]. Statistical manipulations are then performed using the self-perception of one person and his/her perception of the partner, an other-perception [A(A) and A(B)] or [B(B) and B(A)]. Studies using this methodology were prominent in the 1940's and 1950's and were published in both sociological and psychological journals. In the 1960's, "family" journals also published reports using this assessment technique, and in 1970 this topic was viewed as relevant enough for Moss, Apolonio, and Jensen (1970) to include a section dealing with perceptual approaches in the MS/CP area in the Decade Review of the Journal of Marriage and the Family. There was no consideration, however, of these methodological issues included in the 1980 Decade Review. Instead, Murstein discussed two prominent theories of MS/CP which dealt with other-perceptions: His Stimulus-Value-Role theory and Lewis' Premarital Dyadic Formation theory (though empirical tests of both these theories have often used self-self comparisons). In the 1980's, with the exception of Nofz' Fantasy-Testing-Assessment model (1984), which emphasizes the perceptions individuals have of their premarital partners, the literature on the use of other-perceptions is silent.

Given these two means of assessing similarity, the question of which is most appropriate for use in the MS/CP field arises. Evidence from several areas suggests problems associated with the more dominant use of self-perceptions.

PROBLEMS WITH SELF/SELF COMPARISONS

Social Interaction Theory

The first of the problems with self/self comparisons has to do with social interaction theory. Assessments of self-perceptions assume that we relate to others on the basis of how they see themselves. As Udry (1966) pointed out, however, we relate to them not on their perceptions of themselves or on any traits they might "really"
possess, but on our perceptions of them, one of the basic postulates of interpersonal theory (and found in the writings of Thomas and Thomas, Mead, and Schutz, among others). Laing, Thompson, and Lee (1966) built their theory of interpersonal perception around this, stating that differences in direct perceptions "(What Person A thinks of" to "(What person A thinks and)" are not nearly as important as differences between meta-perceptions (what A thinks B thinks A thinks and what B thinks A thinks B thinks), and differences between meta-meta-perceptions". Put in a mate selection context, Udry (1966) states, "we assume that sex-pair interaction is based on perceptions of one another, and that likewise, selection will be based on these same perceptions" (p. 282).

Relation Between Self and Other-Perceptions

Consideration of this point leads us to the second problem in the use of self-perceptions: What is the relation between the perception that an individual holds of his/her partner (an other-perception) and the perception that the partner holds of him/herself (a self-perception)? If there are no differences between the two, or if differences are so small as to be insignificant—if our perceptions of others are accurate assessments of the way we perceive ourselves—then the same information will be obtained from either type of assessment. But if they are not the same, if our perceptions of others differ greatly from their perceptions of themselves, then comparisons between the self-perceptions of individuals would be expected to provide us with inconsistent and often inconsistent results—what is being assessed is different from what the individuals involved are seeing and on what they are acting. A number of researchers have proposed that this is the case (Kirkpatrick & Hobart, 1954; Kerckhoff & Davis, 1962; Trost, 1967; Udry, 1967; Schulman, 1974), and there are two apparent reasons for this conclusion.

Idealization. The first reason has to do with the difficulty of making objective observations about such things as attitudes from social interactions (Trost, 1967), especially during the courtship period. Waller (1938) was among the first to deal with the premarital period as one of heavy idealization in which individuals build up a picture of their partner which may be totally unlike that person’s actual self (Pollis, 1969). Kelly (1941) also pointed out that the view an individual has of his/her partner "may not coincide with objective fact" (p. 193). Murstein (1976) addressed the emphasis during courtship on socially desirable behaviors, noting the possibility that individuals do not really "see" each other during this period. In one of the most recent proposals of a MS/CP model, Nofz (1984) has described the initial courtship phase as one in which each individual bases his/her choice on unrealistic expectations of what the relationship and the partner will be like in the future. Empirical evidence for differences between self-/self-perception comparisons and self-/other-perception comparisons in the premarital period has been provided by Kirkpatrick and Hobart (1954), Kerckhoff and Davis (1962), Udry (1967), Tost (1967), and Schulman (1974).

Assumed similarity. Second, research in social psychology indicates that differences between self- and other-perceptions, in addition to being the norm, form a consistent pattern. Individuals tend to assume greater similarity between themselves and others than actually exists. Miller and Marks (1982) have pointed out that "one of the most reliable findings in the social psychological literature is that people overestimate the degree of similarity between themselves and other persons on an array of dimensions (e.g., attitudes, personality traits, behaviors)" (p. 100). Tagiuri (1969) defined this as "false consensus", which refers to, "the inclination, under certain circumstances, to attribute to others responses one would give oneself, a form of projection" (p. 411). Others have defined this same concept as "assumed similarity", which refers to a tendency for individuals to believe that their own attitudes, abilities, and behaviors are

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common among others (Gilovich, Jennings, & Jennings, 1983; Tabacknik, Crocker, & Alley, 1983). This tendency includes not only this assumption of commonness, but also the view that one's behaviors and judgments are the appropriate ones for the situation (Gilovich et al., 1983). The effect has been demonstrated with varying degrees of strength across issues, but has been found to operate on attitudes, behaviors, personal problems, expectations, preferences, characteristics, and abilities (Gilovich et al., 1983; Ross, Greene, & House, 1977). Based on this effect, van der Plight (1984) has suggested that people "operate within a 'false' social world, or at least one quite different from that observed by the social scientist" (p. 57). Similarly, Ross et al. (1973) state that the false consensus effect represents support for the view that, "raters" perceptions of social consensus and their social inferences about actors represent the raters' own behavioral choices" (p. 294).

Alternative Explanations

Social psychologists have proposed a number of explanations for the assumed similarity effect. A brief examination of that literature suggests four explanatory contexts than seem relevant to the present discussion.

Balance theory. Balance theory stems largely from Heider's work and deals with social perception and with the assumption that there are general principles used to organize things. Heider's approach is basically a phenomenological one in that he is more concerned with individuals perceptions of their social relationships than he is with those relationships in any objective sense. His theory concerns itself with three elements: person (P), usually the self; other (O); and object or issue (X). The "balance" in the theory refers to the relationships between the three elements. According to Heider, the three relationships should be balanced--if P likes O and O likes X, then P should also like X; if P likes X and O likes X, then P and O should like each other. Imbalance in relationships causes tension, and the organism strains toward balance. To achieve this balance, it may be necessary for the individual to project his own values, attitudes, etc., onto the other person involved.

Byrne and Blaylock (1963), in a study of married couples, draw on Heider's theory, pointing out that the symmetry called for may be obtained through the individual misperceiving his/her partner's attitudes. They point out the experimental validation of this view in the perception of similarity in others whom we like, and dissimilarity in others whom we dislike, and argue that, "it is easier to misperceive the attitudes of one's spouse than it is to alter attitudes toward either spouse or the object of communication" (p. 637). They argue that, if similarity between the two individuals is rewarding, there should be a tendency to assume more similarity than actually exists. Conversely, if dissimilarity is rewarding, assumed should be greater than actual dissimilarity.

Motivational explanations. According to the motivational view, "actors perceive their behavior as highly consensual in order to convince themselves that they have acted appropriately" (Zuckerman, Mann, & Bernieri, 1982, p. 839). The desire to maintain one's self-esteem is assumed as a motivational basis for different attributional preferences (Krahe, 1983). Ross et al. (1977) contend that false consensus fosters and justifies the individual's "feelings that his own behavioral choices are appropriate and rational responses to the demands of the environment, rather than reflections of his distinguishing personal disposition" (p. 297). In other words, through using the false consensus effect, the individual doesn't have to make any trait inferences about himself.

Non-motivational explanations. Explanations for the assumed similarity effect that
fall outside of the motivational realm include:

1. Attributed causality: An individual tends to believe that whatever caused his behavior will also cause others in the same situation to respond in the same manner (Zuckerman et al., 1982).

2. Availability or salience: The behavioral choices that individuals make for themselves are readily and easily retrieved from their memory. This ease and readiness create a strong influence on the individual's estimates of the behavioral choices of others (Zuckerman et al., 1982).

3. Selected exposure: The people most individuals know and associate with tend to be people who share their background, values, and outlooks. A greater than average number of these people, therefore, should respond as the individual would in a number of situations and under various circumstances. Exposure to a biased group such as this tends to lessen the chance of making an error (Ross et al., 1977; Zuckerman et al., 1982).

4. Ambiguity resolution: Individuals often attempt to resolve ambiguity by assuming that everyone else feels the same way he/she does (Ross et al., 1977).

5. Attribution theory: Attribution theory deals with the kind of information that is necessary for an individual to be willing to infer population performances. Two sources of such information have been proposed: self-based and sample-based (Hansen & Donoghue, 1977). Evidence for both has been found, as well as suggesting that which one has the most impact will be determined by circumstances of the situation (Kilik & Taylor, 1980).

Equity theory. According to equity theory (Walster, Walster, & Berscheid, 1978), people evaluate the relationships that they are involved in to see if they are equitable. When they perceive that their relationships are inequitable, they will become distressed. This injustice will then lead them to attempt to restore equity to the relationship (Lujansky & Mikula, 1983). There are two ways to do this. The first is to change the balance within the relationship—to restore actual equity. It is the second that is important in an assumed similarity context, and that is to change one’s perceptions of the balance within the relationship—to restore psychological equity. One way of doing this might be to distort the perception of the partner, changing it to make him/her more like the individual doing the distorting.

SELF- AND OTHER-PERCEPTIONS IN MS/CP

Relation Between Self- and Other-Perceptions

Evidence for perceptual distortions in MS/CP is strong, though the direction of such distortions is not consistent. In addition to evidence of general perceptual distortions (Udry, 1967; Hill, Peplau, & Rubin, 1981; Bailey & Chorosaic, 1980), there is evidence of distortion in positive directions or assumed similarity (Kelly, 1941; Kirkpatrick & Hobart, 1954; Murstein, 1967; Trost, 1967; Karp, Jackson, & Lester, 1970) and idealization (Kerckhoff & Davis, 1962; Centers, 1971; Schulman, 1974). There also is evidence of distortions in a negative direction, the exaggeration of existing differences (Udry, 1963).

Although these results cannot be seen as conclusive, they do suggest a trend and
a need for further research. Together these issues suggest that assessments between the self-perceptions of two individuals, while perhaps being an accurate assessment of "real" similarity, would generally underestimate the amount of similarity seen by the individuals involved in that relationship—the perceptions and similarity on which those individuals build a relationship. With this in mind, we now turn to an examination of those factors that have been found to relate to an individual's perception of his/her premarital partner.

Relation of Other-Perceptions to Other Factors

Ideal Spouse Perceptions. Prince and Baggaley (1963) found that the needs and traits attributed to an individual's concept of an ideal spouse were related to the individual's own needs and traits. Udry (1965) later suggested that this ideal mate image might be attributed to the premarital partner regardless of whether it fit him/her. While Udry's data did not support this, other research has found significant relations between \[A(B)\] and \[A(Ideal Spouse)\] (Bailey & Helm, 1974), as well as stronger relations between \[A(B)\] and \[A(Ideal Spouse)\] than either \[B(B)\] and \[A(Ideal Spouse)\] (Murstein, 1967; 1971) or \[A(A)\] and \[B(B)\] (Murstein, 1967, 1976).

Oedipal Factors. Kent (1951) suggested that traits (real or imagined) attributed to the parent of the opposite sex could be desired in a future spouse and projected onto the premarital partner. While Kent did not address such projection empirically, earlier research addressed these projections using female participants. Mangus (1936) found that the ideal spouse image was closer to the image held of the current dating partner than to the father or the favorite, non-father male relative.

Individual Needs, the Self, and the Ideal Self. Udry (1963) suggested that an individual's perception of his/her partner might be influenced by the individual's own needs and traits. His results, and those of Centers (1971), supported this, with the perception of the partner based more on an attribution of the individual's own traits to him/her rather than any traits he/she actually possessed. Udry (1966) later investigated how the individual's needs and traits impacted upon partner perception, concluding that the traits and needs most important to the perceiver would be the most influential in his/her perception of the partner.

Moving beyond this type of relation, Bailey and Chorosevic (1980) and Bailey and Kelly (1984) found that perceptions of support for one's self-concept (feeling that one is accepted as one is) were more important than perceptions of similarity. Finally, Murstein (1971) proposed that the self/partner relation would be mediated by the perceiver's own self-acceptance. In this case, the individual who was satisfied with him/herself, for whom \[A(A) = A(Ideal A)\], would perceive his/her partner as similar to him/herself. In contrast, the individual who was dissatisfied with him/herself for whom \[A(A) = /A Ideal A)\], would perceive his/her partner as different from \[A(A)\] and similar to \[A(Ideal A)\]. Murstein's data and those of Karp, Jackson, and Lester (1970) supported this hypothesis.

Courtship Progress. Several relations have been proposed between partner perception and courtship progress. Evidence has been presented for a positive relation between accurate perceptions of the partner's self-concept \[A(B)\] and relationship stage (Kirkpatrick & Hobart, 1954; Vernon & Stewart, 1957; Stewart & Vernon, 1959; Pollis, 1969). Other research, however, supported this relation either for males only (Goodman & Ofshe, 1968), for females only (Murstein, 1972; 1974) or not at all (Hobart, 1960). Evidence also has been presented relating courtship progress to accurate perceptions of the partner's ideal self-concept \[A(B Ideal-self)\] (Murstein, 1972; 1974).
Murstein (1972; 1974) and Bailey and Helm (1974) found a positive relation between courtship progress and perceiving that the partner matched the perceiver's own ideal self-concept \[A(\text{Ideal self}) = A(B)\].

SUGGESTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Close examination of the other-perception literature shows that much of it, like the self-perception literature, is characterized by inconsistent, sometimes contradictory, findings (i.e., assumed similarity vs. exaggeration of differences, courtship progress, perceived similarity vs. perceived support). More importantly, however, little is really known about the causes, effects, or correlates of distortion in the premarital period.

While it is clear that such distortions are present, it seems likely that they would not be consistent across all variables, characteristics, situations, or relationships. It might be fruitful here to paraphrase Frank's (1979) comment on Thomas and Thomas' situational theorem and ask: Under what circumstances might an individual be able to define his/her partner differently from the way that individual defines him/herself? In an interesting parallel, Frank has pointed out that the social construction of reality is almost unquestionably constrained by structures which operate within the society. In the same way, it is logical to suggest that there are factors which would be expected to constrain the amount of perceptual distortion that occurs between members of a premarital dyad. There is insufficient evidence as to what these factors would be, but it can be hypothesized that they could be divided into four sources--perceiver, perceiver, overall relationship, and social influence. Most of the previous research in the area has focused on a limited number of traits in the perceived--his/her self, ideal self, needs characteristics, and ideal-spouse concept--while ignoring the partner (see Figure 1). Variables such as general psychological functioning, family history, history of previous relationships, self-monitoring, presentation of self, feelings of understanding and of being understood, self-disclosure, and regard all can be hypothesized as relating to how accurately an individual will perceive or be perceived by his/her partner. Such relationships, however, remain untested.

Social influence also is unexplored. As Milardo and Lewis (1985) have pointed out, however, relationships develop in a rich mixture of family and social networks, not in the social vacuum that much of the MS/CP literature suggests. Family members, friends, and co-workers all have an impact upon relationships, as do the larger cultural norms and the more specific familial norms regarding the premarital process. When is it "time" to marry? What type person is an appropriate partner? How is the developing couple treated by others? How do others see the partner? The impact of factors such as these on partner perception is unknown at this time.

In the same way, the overall relationship remains uninvestigated, with the sole exception of relationship stage. Missing is a transactional approach to the relationship, studying it and perception as an ongoing process between the two individuals, and having characteristics of its own apart from them. It is highly unlikely, for example, that the partner's self-perception, \[B(B)\], and his/her view of A, \[B(A)\], have no impact upon \[A(B)\]. Investigating questions such as these would require moving away from the conceptualization of distortion as a between-groups variable (used in most studies), and conceptualizing it instead as an individual differences, couple-specific variable.
A more complete (though still incomplete) model incorporating these views is presented in Figure 2. Models of this type allow the investigation of self/other perceptions in this way, and are more easily testable given the current wealth of statistical programs dealing with structural equations models (i.e., LVPLS, COSAN, and LISREL).

Finally, even given the large amount of distortion that occurs in the premarital period, it is difficult to believe that studying other-perceptions alone will be of any more assistance in understanding how similarity operates in the courtship process than studying self-perceptions alone has. Even though the two may differ, it seems highly unlikely that they will be either orthogonal or uncorrelated. It might be more fruitful to incorporate self-and other-perceptions rather than try to choose one over the other. If comparisons between self-perceptions are conceptualized as indices of agreement and comparisons between self- and other-perceptions are conceptualized as indices of awareness, couples can be placed on a 4 X 2, awareness by agreement, grid (see Figure 3). Doing so will allow researchers to investigate the relative impact of these factors as well as look at a number of other questions. Do the two factors combine to effect MS/CP? If so, in what way—additively or interactively? What is the role of disagreement in MS/CP? Does an awareness of disagreements negate their impact, or is ignorance truly bliss? Are there gender differences in awareness, or can the four awareness cells be collapsed into three "-Both Aware; One Aware; One Unaware; Both Unaware?

The premarital relationship remains a very important area of study for students of the family. This author has reviewed one topic in this area, the use of other-perceptions in the assessment of similarity, and has made suggestions for future research. It is hoped that an expansion of the study of similarity in these directions might lead to new conceptualizations as well as deal with some of the deficits currently found in the area.

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Figure 2. Proposed model

Psychological Functioning

Self-Acceptance → Ideal Self

B's View of A

Relationship History → A's View of A

A's View of B → B's View of B

Family History

Ideal Spouse

Social Influences

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Figure 3. Awareness by agreement grid

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REFERENCES


