Birds of a Feather Flock Together:

Complexity and Variation of the Similarity-Attraction Effect

Katherine Mihelarakis

Messiah College
Birds of a Feather Flock Together: Complexity and Variation of the Similarity-Attraction Effect

In all types of relationships, from cliques and friendships to dating and marriages, we notice, even unconsciously, that people almost always interact and spend the most time with those who are similar to them. While we accept this fact as an almost self-evident truth, the question as to why this homophily, or tendency to associate with similar individuals, occurs so often and in so many situations, begs to be answered. Do these birds of a feather flock together because they feel fear or loathing towards others who are different, or is their similarity-attraction bred out of some extreme egocentrism that causes them seek the company of friends who remind them of themselves? Throughout a plethora of studies, experiments, and surveys, one statement appears to be consistent. People are inclined to seek the companionship and company of others who are similar to themselves in a variety of areas, and this inclination is influenced strongly by socio-economic, cultural, and personality factors.

One study conducted by Steven J. Heine, Julie-Ann B. Foster, and Roy Spina in the *Asian Journal of Social Psychology* titled “Do birds of a feather universally flock together? Cultural variation in the similarity-attraction effect” (2009) explores the theory that the strength of homophily differs from culture to culture. For the study, a group of Canadian students as well as a group of Japanese students were asked to fill out a questionnaire in which they rated four different people: themselves, a friend, someone they neither liked nor disliked, and an enemy. The students rated these people on positive, negative, and neutral personality traits and similarity to themselves in the areas of activities, attitudes, and demographic information, such as religious beliefs and socio-economic status.

The results of the study concluded that the similarity-attraction effect most definitely did occur and that the students viewed themselves to be most similar to their friends in many
categories and the least similar to their enemies and those they neither liked nor disliked. However, this effect was found to be much more pronounced with Canadian students than Japanese students (Heine, Foster, & Spina, 2009). This seems to provide evidence that cultural influences do exist concerning homophily and the similarity-attraction effect. The results of the experiment could perhaps help to argue that homophily is less of a psychological phenomenon and more of a social invention or inclination which is more prevalent in North American cultures than others.

Following in the tradition of similarity attraction and how it relates to diversity and varying socio-economic statuses, a study conducted by Elizabeth E. Umphress, Kristin Smith-Crowe, Arthur P. Brief, Joerg Dietz, and Marla Baskerville Watkins for the *Journal of Applied Psychology* (2007) proposed that demographic similarity can at times attract people to each other, but it can also repel people away from one another. To test this theory, undergraduate students of high-status and low-status backgrounds were given business letters and asked to review them based on qualities such as organization and likeability. Each letter was given the same fictional company name, however the name of the person who had written the letter was changed for certain groups, one name representing a higher-class status (generic white or American names) and others representing a lower-status (generic black or ethnic names).

The study found that while similarity-attraction was strong in all groups, and students of certain statuses seemed to be attracted to letters from people whose names represented their same status, the similarity-attraction effect was much stronger in high-status individuals than low-status individuals (Umphress, Smith-Crowe, Brief, Dietz, & Watkins, 2007). This further proves the point made in the previous article that homophily is largely a social construction. It also seems that this is true because it is more prevalent in predominantly high-class and white
societies, such as Canada, the country used in the previous study. This could be due to the fact that North America and parts of Europe have been oppressive to those different than them for centuries and that this prejudice still unconsciously exists, or that people of European or Caucasian ancestry have been enormously more privileged than other ethnicities and therefore feel the most comfortable with others in their own social spheres and not those who have a much different socio-economic status.

Another study on homophily suggests a correlation between close friendships and academic status, or GPA (Barnes, Beaver, Young, & Teneyck, 2014). The study found that students tended to associate with peers that possessed similar grades. There also appears to be “a strong predictive relationship between the target individual’s GPA and that of his/her peers” (Barnes et al., 2014). The results of the study reinforce the social status and competence theory of influence on homophily, as the students were shown to organize themselves by academic ability, which can also correlate strongly with socio-economic concepts such as race and class. It also demonstrates that genetics play an important role in similarity-attraction, as intellect and school performance can be partly attributed to inherited genes.

One study in particular sought to test a hypothesis that similarity-attraction is stronger in some areas and weaker in others (Hamm, 2000). The subjects consisted of various ethnic groups: African Americans, Asian American, and European Americans. The areas tested included ethnic identity, academic orientation, and substance abuse. The results found that different ethnic groups shared similarities to their selected friends in different areas. For example, African Americans showed the most similarity to their friends in regards to ethnic identity, while Asian Americans demonstrated the greatest similarity to their friends in regards to academic orientation. This demonstrates the complexity of the similarity-attraction effect, and suggests that
people will almost never choose companions who are similar in all aspects. The results also tie in with previous studies in that the phenomenon varies from culture to culture and that different ethnicities or social groups may prefer to be similar to their companions and friends in certain categories and not others.

Various studies confirm the existence of the similarity-attraction phenomenon, but the fact that it appears to be universally true to some degree does not mean it is the same for each person or culture. The old adage of “birds of a feather flock together” is influenced by a number of psycho-social factors and cannot be easily predicted. If anything, the various studies on similarity-attraction and homophily demonstrate an inherent truth about human nature in that one’s actions cannot be oversimplified by one statement. The human mind and will is a very complex idea and each person possesses unique tendencies, inclinations, and attraction preferences.
References


