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Initial validation of a self-report measure of perceptions of interpersonal attraction

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ABSTRACT

We examine psychometric properties and validity of the Perceptions of Attraction scale (POA). Responses of undergraduate students ($N = 510$) indicate that the POA has high reliability and a coherent factor structure comprising two dimensions of feelings of attraction toward others and perceptions of attraction from others that explain 67% of response variance. POA scores are correlated with social skills and extraversion, but not related to other personality dimensions. POA scores are predictive of outcomes in current romantic relationships ($n = 160$).

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1. Introduction

Interpersonal attraction – perceptions of being attractive to others and feeling attraction toward others – has implications for social interactions and close relationships (Anderson, John, Keltner, & Krings, 2001). Perceptions of attraction are important in interpersonal situations because they are linked to individual psychology, including feelings about the social self (Bale & Archer, 2013) and understanding of one's personal relationships (Sprecher, 1998). Such perceptions also affect outcomes within groups, including social status and influence (Ashmore & Longo, 1995). Despite the role of attraction perceptions in everyday communication and social behavior, and emphasis of theory on perceiver effects in interpersonal attraction (Kenny, 1994), most research on interpersonal attraction focuses on attraction toward specific others (Montoya & Horton, 2014) rather than individual differences in perceptions of attraction across situations, and few measures of such perceptions exist. Such perceptions likely vary with major traits of personality (Graziano, Bruce, Sheese, & Tobin, 2007) and social skills (Friedman, Riggio, & Casella, 1988),

and are linked with outcomes in intimate relationships (Meltzer, McNulty, Jackson, & Karney, 2014). This study examines psychometric properties and convergent, discriminant, and predictive validity of a self-report measure of trait-like perceptions of interpersonal attraction, the Perceptions of Attraction scale (POA).

The Social Relations Model (SRM; Kenny, 1994) outlines multiple processes in interpersonal attraction, including *perceiver effects*, individual tendencies to report similar perceptions across people and situations. Most research on interpersonal attraction focuses on measuring perceivers' attraction toward others and variation with target qualities (Berscheid & Reis, 1998), what SRM calls *target effects*, or a target's eliciting similar responses from most people (Kenny, 1994). Less research examines perceived attraction to and from others as distinct perceiver effects, or tendencies to experience attraction to and from other people in a similar way. Further, most interpersonal attraction research examines self-reports of liking (Back, Schmukle, & Egloff, 2011) or attraction toward *specific* others (Rauthmann & Kolar, 2013), including as potential romantic partners (Klohnen & Luo, 2003). Little research examines trait-like differences in perceptions of attraction to and from others that transcend specific contexts and interactions with specific people.

Research has examined personality, especially the Big Five dimensions (Costa & McCrae, 1992), in relation to interpersonal attraction, but mainly as target effects. Bassili (1981) asserts that Extraversion creates social vitality at the core of attraction in social contexts. Extraverts are sociable and outgoing (McCrae & John,

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1992); they are more likable in first encounters (Friedman et al., 1988) and more popular face-to-face and in social media (Zywica & Danowski, 2008). People describing themselves as extraverted are judged as more attractive from photographs alone. Agreeable people (who are warm and friendly; Costa & McCrae, 1992) are also judged more attractive from photographs than less Agreeable people (Meier, Robinson, Carter, & Hinsz, 2010). Target Neuroticism (negative emotionality; Costa & McCrae, 1992) is linked to negative status impressions of men (Anderson et al., 2001) and lower ratings of women's physical attractiveness (Mathes & Kahn, 1975).

It seems that trait-like feelings of attraction toward others would be most strongly linked with Agreeableness, which involves favorable, good-natured feelings toward other people. People low in Agreeableness evaluate others negatively in a characteristic manner (Graziano et al., 2007); highly Agreeable people are attentive and friendly across situations (Berry & Hansen, 2000). Men higher in Agreeableness report greater attraction toward women of various body sizes compared to men low in Agreeableness (Swami, Buchanan, Furnham, & Tovée, 2008). In first encounters, more self-centered people express less liking toward others, and those with low self-esteem and greater Neuroticism expect less liking from others (Back et al., 2011). Research has not carefully examined trait-like feelings of attraction toward others and relations with other individual differences.

The finding that personality predicts attractiveness ratings in zero-acquaintance situations suggests that personality is linked with attraction-related behaviors, including emotional expressions like smiling (Meier et al., 2010). Scholars assert that dynamic cues of attractiveness (e.g., natural body and facial movements) are vital in understanding interpersonal attraction (Riggio, Widaman, Tucker, & Salinas, 1991), with the core trait of Extraversion linked to greater emotional expressivity (Riggio & Riggio, 2002). Research links skill in emotional expression to being perceived as effective (Riggio, Riggio, Salinas, & Cole, 2003) and attractive by others (DePaulo & Friedman, 1998). Some researchers report sex differences in links between emotional expressivity and being judged as attractive by opposite-sex others. More expressive men are judged as more attractive than less expressive men, and more expressive women are judged as less attractive by men (Riggio & Woll, 1984). Highly sensitive people more accurately perceive non-verbal and verbal cues from others (Riggio, 1986), and as such may more commonly perceive attraction toward themselves than less sensitive people. Men perceive that others are attracted to them more commonly than women (Haselton, 2003).

Interpersonal attraction is reciprocal (Kenny, 1994), with reciprocity of attraction in dyads a predictor of desire for further romantic interaction (Luo & Zhang, 2009) and relationship satisfaction (Meltzer et al., 2014). Trait-like feelings of attraction toward and from others may be linked to feelings of satisfaction and commitment in current romantic relationships as potential alternative partners become more frequently noticed and considered (South & Lloyd, 1995). Research supports the role of individual differences in predicting relationship infidelity (Mark, Janssen, & Milhausen, 2011). Knowing how people experience, communicate, and negotiate feelings of attraction to alternative partners is important to understanding precursors of relationship infidelity (Vangelisti & Gerstenberger, 2004).

1.1. The current study

We examine the factor structure, reliability, and validity of the Perceptions of Attraction scale (POA). We use the entire sample to examine psychometric properties. We examine relations with social skills, personality, self-ratings of physical attractiveness, and prediction of romantic relationship outcomes based on responses of subsamples. We predict that POA scores are positively

correlated with social skills, especially expressivity and sensitivity (Hypothesis 1); that POA scores are positively linked to Extraversion and negatively linked to Neuroticism (Hypothesis 2); and that perceptions of attraction from others are positively correlated with self-ratings of physical attractiveness, while attraction toward others is not (Hypothesis 3). We hypothesize that POA scores predict desirability of alternative relationships among participants currently in relationships (Hypothesis 4).

2. Method

2.1. Participants

Participants are 510 undergraduate students (76.4% women, M age = 23 years, range = 18–66, SD = 5.9) at a state university in California. Participants were 51.6% Latino/a-American, 17.3% Asian-American, 9.2% African-American, 8.6% Euro-American, 2.3% Middle Eastern American, 11% another ethnicity (13 missing). Of those currently in romantic relationships (n = 160), 10.6% are married, 9.4% engaged, 8.1% live together, 65% dating exclusively, 6.9% dating not exclusively. Average relationship length is 41.1 months (1–264 months).

2.2. Procedures

Participants completed measures in two sessions (advertised as separate studies, different data collectors), in classrooms (not during class) in groups of 20–40, for 30–60 min. Participants were not told sessions were related until after Session 2. Participants use last four digits of their telephone number as identification numbers, allowing response matching. In Session 1, participants completed perceptions of attraction, social skills, and demographic information (N = 448). In other sections of Session 1, participants completed personality measures and self-ratings of physical attractiveness (n = 104). Four to six weeks later, participants described current romantic relationships in Session 2 (20–30 min) (n = 160). Participants not in relationships were instructed to report on a past relationship (n = 288 excluded). An additional subsample (n = 62) completed perceptions of attraction only and again two weeks later (time 2 scores, n = 55, used for test-retest reliability only). We obtained Institutional Review Board approval. Participants received 1% extra credit per session.

2.3. Measures

Participants provided demographic information and completed self-report measures:

- (1) The *Perceptions of Attraction* scale (POA), 15 items assessing feelings of attraction toward others (6 items) and perceptions that others are attracted to oneself (9 items) (see Appendix). Participants are instructed to indicate agreement with each item “about yourself” (1 = *strongly disagree*, 4 = *neutral*, 7 = *strongly agree*).
- (2) The *Social Skill Inventory* (SSI; Riggio, 1989), 90 items measuring social (verbal) and emotional (nonverbal) communication skills: expressivity (ability to transmit), sensitivity (to communications of others), control (ability to regulate). Respondents indicate how items describe themselves (1 = *not at all like me*, 5 = *exactly like me*).
- (3) The *Big Five Inventory Personality Test* (John & Srivastava, 1999), 44 items assessing Extraversion (warmth, assertiveness; 8 items), Conscientiousness (competence, order; 9 items), Agreeableness (trust, straightforwardness; 9 items), Neuroticism (emotional instability; 8 items), Openness (to ideas, values, etc.; 10 items). Respondents indicate agreement

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