



My friends are all alike – the relation between liking and perceived similarity in person perception



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HIGHLIGHT

- People have more knowledge about liked others compared to disliked others.
- Positivity displays a smaller diversity than negativity.
- People perceive liked others as more similar to one another than disliked others.
- Thinking about people's positive traits makes them appear more similar to one another.

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ABSTRACT

Past research showed that people accumulate more knowledge about other people and objects they like compared to those they dislike. More knowledge is commonly assumed to lead to more differentiated mental representations; therefore, people should perceive others they like as less similar to one another than others they dislike. We predict the opposite outcome based on the density hypothesis (Unkelbach, Fiedler, Bayer, Stegmüller, & Danner, 2008); accordingly, positive impressions are less diverse than negative impressions as there are only a few ways to be liked but many ways to be disliked. Therefore, people should perceive liked others as more similar to one another than disliked others even though they have more knowledge about liked others. Seven experiments confirm this counterintuitive prediction and show a strong association between liking and perceived similarity in person perception. We discuss the implications of these results for different aspects of person perception.

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1. Introduction

It seems evident that liking breeds differentiation. Wine lovers can differentiate between a Merlot and a Syrah, art enthusiasts see the differences between a Monet and a Renoir, and soccer fans can distinguish between the playing styles of Lionel Messi and Thomas Müller. In social psychological research, this notion is found in broad phenomena like the out-group homogeneity effect (Quattrone & Jones, 1980; Park & Rothbart, 1982) or the cross-race effect (Feingold, 1914; Young, Hugenberg, Bernstein, & Sacco, 2012) – people differentiate better between members of their usually preferred in-groups and between faces of their own ethnic identity compared to out-group members and faces from other ethnicities. Liking breeds differentiation because information sampling follows a hedonic principle (e.g., Fazio, Eiser, & Shook, 2004; Thorndike, 1898). People seek interactions with persons they like and avoid interacting with disliked persons (Denrell, 2005).

As a result, people's mental representations of liked others are highly differentiated as opposed to the rather shallow representations they have of disliked persons (e.g., Smallman & Roese, 2008). A direct implication of this liking-breeds-differentiation principle is that social perceivers should see liked persons as more diverse while disliked persons should all seem alike.

Despite the intuitive appeal of a general dislike-homogeneity phenomenon, a different line of research suggests that liking might go along with increased perceived similarity. According to the “Density Hypothesis”, positive information is less diverse and thus more densely clustered in spatial representations compared to negative information (Unkelbach, Fiedler, Bayer, Stegmüller, & Danner, 2008; Unkelbach, 2012). Similar to the principle observable in facial attractiveness, there are only a few possible ways to be liked but many different ways to be disliked (Potter, Corneille, Ruys, & Rhodes, 2007). Here, we apply this principle to person perception; based on the density hypothesis, we present a model that assumes perceived similarity among other people to be based on their matching and non-matching features. Because people should represent liked persons with predominantly positive features and because positive features are less diverse, a counterintuitive

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scenario follows: Social perceivers should see other people they like (e.g., their friends) as more similar to one another than other people they dislike even though they have collected more knowledge about liked others and therefore have a more differentiated representation of them. The goal of the present work is to examine the relation between liking and perceived similarity in person perception, and to test whether the liking-breeds-differentiation principle causes people to perceive liked others as more diverse, or whether the small diversity of positivity makes all liked others appear similar.

The nature of the relation between liking and perceived similarity has strong implications for social perception: Perceiving others as similar or different from one another is a determinant of many social cognitive processes including social categorization (Tajfel, Billig, Bundy, & Flament, 1971; Billig & Tajfel, 1973), generalization and stereotyping (Ames, 2004; Gawronski & Quinn, 2013; Linville, Salovey, & Fischer, 1986), social comparison (Mussweiler, 2003), as well as person memory (Earles, Kersten, Curtayne, & Perle, 2008; Heathcote, Freeman, Etherington, Tonkin, & Bora, 2009).

In the following, we first introduce the concept of differentiation and explain why liking should breed differentiation, and accordingly, why social perceivers might perceive liked others as more diverse compared to disliked others. We then delineate the density principle, namely why positive information should display low diversity, and accordingly, why social perceivers might see persons they like as more similar, despite having more knowledge. The following empirical part presents data from seven experiments that systematically investigated the relation between liking and perceived similarity in person perception. Finally, we discuss implications from our research for different aspects of person perception such as mood effects, and social comparison processes.

1.1. Differentiation and evaluation

Social perception has two fundamental characteristics: it is driven by the process of differentiation, and its outcome is typically evaluative. Differentiation is a core concept of human perception and cognition, and it is essential for any kind of categorization and plays a particularly prominent role in social psychological theorizing. Seeing the differences and the similarities among individuals determines many aspects of social perception and behavior, such as perceived group membership (Campbell, 1958; Zárate & Sanders, 1999), social comparison (Mussweiler, 2003), or interpersonal interaction (Tajfel, 1982). For example, differentiation was described to be “at the heart of the stereotype concept” (Linville et al., 1986, p. 165) as stereotypes arise from a lack of differentiation between individuals (Park & Hastie, 1987). Consequently, much social psychological research is devoted to the perception of variability among group members (e.g. Judd & Park, 1988; Judd, Ryan, & Park, 1991; see Rubin & Badaea, 2012 for an overview), including fascinating phenomena, such as the mentioned out-group homogeneity effect and the cross-race effect (e.g., Quattrone & Jones, 1980; Ostrom & Sedikides, 1992). While social perception is driven by differentiation, its outcome is typically evaluative. In order to navigate complex social environments, humans have to distinguish good from bad people and decide whom they like and whom they dislike (Lewin, 1935). In the present work we want to address how differentiation and evaluation, the two concepts most central to social perception, are related in people's mental representation of their social world.

More specifically, we ask whether people perceive others they like or others they dislike as more similar to one another. As introduced above, we believe there are two competing scenarios: (1) Liking goes along with increased perceived diversity (i.e., decreased perceived similarity); (2) liking goes along with decreased perceived diversity (i.e., increased perceived similarity). We first review evidence for the first scenario building on the principle that liking breeds differentiation.

1.2. Liking-breeds-differentiation

There is substantial evidence indicating that people have highly differentiated representations of the things and individuals they like. For example, people divide liked objects into more categories than disliked objects and use finer evaluative distinctions when expressing attitudes about liked vs. disliked stimuli (e.g., Smallman & Roese, 2008; Smallman, Becker, & Roese, 2014). In addition, research on the perception of group variability shows that perceptions of homogeneity tend to have negative associations while heterogeneity has positive associations. Groups that are perceived as homogenous “are usually low status, low power, minority groups, whose members are perceived in less individualistic terms, receive less attention, and display less positive emotions” (Badea, Brauer, & Rubin, 2012, p. 1094; see also Brauer & Bourhis, 2006; Fiske, Haslam, & Fiske, 1991).

But why should people have a more differentiated representation of the objects and persons they like? One answer is that human information sampling follows a hedonic principle, first described by Thorndike (1898) as the law-of-effect. Accordingly, people are more likely to engage in exploratory behavior (e.g., interactions with another person) if the behavior is expected to have positive consequences (see also Chen & Bargh, 1999; Fazio et al., 2004; Hirt, Melton, McDonald, & Harackiewicz, 1996). This hedonic principle of information sampling also serves the purpose of maintaining internal cognitive consistency (Festinger, 1954). As a result, people collect larger information samples (i.e., more knowledge) and derive a more differentiated representation about liked others than about disliked others (Denrell, 2005). Smallman and Roese (2008) explicitly expressed this idea as “to cherish a loved one is to relish the fine nuances of his or her personality” while “the rejected and forsaken are construed on a relatively surface level” (p. 1228).

As more differentiated representations typically go along with decreased perceived similarity (e.g. Goldstone & Steyvers, 2001; Nosofsky, 1986; Shepard, 1987), liked persons should be perceived as less similar to one another than disliked others. In line with this idea, Linville, Fischer, and Salovey (1989) showed that when people become more familiar with a person or a group, they perceive them as more diverse. Likewise, familiarity leads to more differentiated categorical constructions and evokes less generalizations among objects (Medin, Lynch, Coley, & Atran, 1997; Rota & Zellner, 2007).

Taken together, a large body of empirical research suggests that liking a person invites repeated exposure, increases the amount of knowledge, and thereby leads to a more differentiated representation of liked compared to disliked others, which indicates less similarity. From the perspective of a hedonic principle of information sampling, it seems evident that people should perceive liked others as diverse and disliked others as similar, constituting a general dislike-homogeneity effect.

1.3. Diversity of positive and negative impressions

Despite the arguments reviewed so far, we believe that the seemingly obvious negative relation between liking and perceived similarity might not hold in most contexts. In fact, we suggest that liking often comes with increased perceived similarity. Clearly, information sampling follows a hedonic principle and people have rich representations of the people they like. However, these rich representations should entail predominantly positive information, while disliked others should be represented by negative information. Crucially, information valence is confounded with content diversity; negative information is more diverse than positive information. As a result, mental representations of different disliked people can be rather different while mental representations of different liked others should be rather similar.

The idea that positivity comes in small diversity was introduced as the “Density Hypothesis” by Unkelbach et al. (2008). The authors showed that positive stimuli display a higher density in spatial displays of mental representations than negative stimuli, an ecological

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