

COMMENT

Does Familiarity Breed Contempt or Liking? Comment on Reis, Maniaci, Caprariello, Eastwick, and Finkel (2011)

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Reis, Maniaci, Caprariello, Eastwick, and Finkel (2011) conducted 2 studies that demonstrate that in certain cases, familiarity can lead to liking—in seeming contrast to the results of our earlier article (Norton, Frost, & Ariely, 2007). We believe that Reis et al. (a) utilized paradigms far removed from spontaneous, everyday social interactions that were particularly likely to demonstrate a positive link between familiarity and liking and (b) failed to include and incorporate other sources of data—both academic and real-world—showing that familiarity breeds contempt. We call for further research exploring when and why familiarity is likely to lead to contempt or liking, and we suggest several factors that are likely to inform this debate.

Keywords: familiarity, person perception, impression formation, mere exposure, close relationships

We were both pleased and displeased to see the recent article by Reis, Maniaci, Caprariello, Eastwick, and Finkel (2011) challenging the findings and account of our article (Norton, Frost, & Ariely, 2007)—pleased because it is always a compliment to have conducted research that irritated very smart people who we respect a great deal enough to want to follow-up on, but displeased because we believe that Reis et al. have overstated the generalizability of their results and underreported other streams of literature that are in conflict with their account (reviewed below) and, even more, that Reis et al. missed an opportunity to begin to construct an account that would integrate their findings, our findings, and the existing literature into a broader account of the link between knowledge and liking.

Are the Paradigms Representative of Everyday Social Interactions?

We absolutely agree with Reis et al. (2011) that our two very different methods of assessing whether more information leads to less liking—a trait-based paradigm in which we carefully control the amount of information presented, and a naturalistic experiment surveying online daters both before and after dates—are not fully

representative of all of the ways in which people come to know each other. As a result, we are very much in favor of research that explores when and how information might lead to more liking rather than less liking—and in particular, research that explains *why* information might sometimes lead to more rather than less liking. In our mind, however, the results reported by Reis et al. fall short on both accounts, adding data from two experiments that take place in very specific settings with a specific participant population—but then using the data from these experiments to make the broad claim, as their title states, that “familiarity does indeed promote attraction.”

Their first claim is that our two methods of assessing the link between information and liking are not fully representative of what usually occurs in social interaction: “natural social interaction involves contexts and processes not present in Norton et al.’s research” (Reis et al., 2011, p. 557). We could not agree more—yet, we also disagree strongly with the implication of their claim that their paradigms do in fact capture “natural social interaction.” We would have guessed that if Reis et al. (2011) were trying to examine natural social interactions, they would not have used a laboratory paradigm in which undergraduates alternated answering questions designed to promote relationship closeness (Study 1), *or* a paradigm in which undergraduates do not even meet face-to-face but chat via the Internet. Indeed, the task used in Study 1—the Relationship Closeness Induction Task (RCIT; Sedikides, Campbell, Reeder, & Elliot, 1998)—was specifically designed to make people like each other more, building on the well-documented finding that people tend to like others after disclosing to them (see Collins & Miller, 1994, for a review). In a follow-up article, the creators of this disclosure task specifically noted the difference between their task and real-world relationships:

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At the same time, naturally occurring friendships differ in important ways from induced closeness. Most notably, friendships extend across time and setting, whereas induced closeness exists only in the short duration of the RCIT (i.e., 9 min) and in the laboratory. (Campbell, Sedikides, Reeder, & Elliot, 2000)

Although Reis et al. (2011) noted this limitation, they then moved to a task in Study 2 that introduces a different but equally problematic source of induced closeness: online chatting. A large body of research has documented the ways in which the relative anonymity of online communication can lead to “hyperpersonal communication,” in which the ambiguity of cues in online communication (a result of the lack of face-to-face contact) leads receivers to overperceive similarity in their partner and then to engage in strategic self-presentation to match that similarity, leading to relationships that become artificially close and intense in a very short period of time (Turner, Grube, & Meyers, 2001; Walther, 1996, 1997). Thus, the paradigms in both studies, likely unintentionally, serve to increase perceived similarity and liking by including elements quite different from natural social interactions.

Even if we allow that Reis et al.’s (2011) paradigms somewhat mirror natural interactions—which we believe is suspect—the assumption that the two kinds of interactions utilized are the most common or paradigmatic ways of learning about others is also problematic. Frequently, for instance, we learn information about others before we meet them through our social networks—either through our friends telling us about them or increasingly via social networking websites, such as Facebook, where we view people’s likes, dislikes, education, employment, and so on before meeting. In this sense, our trait paradigm—which again we agree is far removed from everyday social interaction—is not so unlike how people often learn about others, obtaining information from sources other than talking directly to that person. Indeed, some 45% of employers in a survey conducted by Harris Interactive for CareerBuilder.com reported gathering information about potential hires from their social media profiles (Wortham, 2009).

This last point also relates to Reis et al.’s (2011) critique of our online dating data, which they have described as “a special case that cannot be generalized to other forms of attraction and interaction. Online dating emphasizes evaluation, because participants typically choose among many alternative partners” (p. 559). We agree that online dating is not the sole paradigmatic case of learning about others—though again laboratory settings and online chats are not either—but we take issue with the idea that everyday interaction does not involve evaluation. Given limitations on the number of social contacts humans are equipped to handle—Dunbar’s number, usually estimated at roughly 150 (Dunbar, 1992)—humans are of necessity constantly screening people for whether they will “make” our exclusive set of 150. This limit has been shown in a number of contexts, with estimates ranging into the 200s in some investigations but no higher (e.g., Bernard, Shelley, & Killworth, 1987). Indeed, even analyses of network data from Facebook—seemingly the way to manage limitless connections—show that the average person has less than 200 friends and regularly communicates with just 35–45 friends in any 2-month period (Burke, Marlow, & Lento, 2010).

More broadly, it is simply unclear to us how humans could be built such that when we meet people, the more we learn about

them, the more we like them. Would this mean that when we meet someone at any given party and acquire one piece of information about this person, we become transfixed by him/her and like him/her more and more over the evening, never talking to anyone else? Would we expect even a randomly selected 16-year-old male adolescent and a 75-year-old woman to like each other more and over the course of chatting? We suspect both of them might seek to end the interaction as soon as possible.

Do Other Sources of Evidence Show That Familiarity Breeds Contempt or Liking?

Thus, for a number of reasons, we believe that the paradigms utilized by Reis et al. (2011) are not ideal for providing a critical test of whether and when familiarity breeds contempt or liking. We admit, however, that our paradigms are not ideal either, because they suffer from some limitations as well. As a result, we searched for additional sources of data—both academic and real-world—that addressed this issue. As we outline below, the sources we found tend to support the notion that more information leads to less liking.

Academic Research

In Reis et al.’s (2011) studies, participants are in some sense stuck in interactions that are difficult to exit—they have to stay until the end of the laboratory session in Study 1, and they do not get paid as much if they do not complete their chats in Study 2. Even if Reis et al. are claiming that their effect holds only in forced interactions that people cannot leave—which again calls into question how natural and spontaneous their paradigms are—there are a number of studies that show that even for people forced to interact, liking decreases over time. Berg (1984); Shook and Fazio (2008); and West, Pearson, Dovidio, Shelton, and Trail (2009) all have shown main effects such that college roommates on average like each other less over time. Thus, using the same sample as Reis et al.—college undergraduates—but with a longitudinal and more externally valid paradigm, these articles demonstrate that greater interaction with others in very naturalistic settings leads to less liking. In fact, in Berg’s study, roommates who chose not to continue as roommates after one semester showed decreases in liking over time, and even those who chose to continue as roommates showed either no increase in liking or even a slight decrease. Reis et al. dismissed the articles by writing that “because none of these studies were true experiments, their interpretations are potentially ambiguous” (p. 558). It may very well be true that these articles are not true experiments—though many college roommates are randomly assigned, and often when they are not, it is on the basis of trying to increase similarity (putting morning people together and night owls together)—but how can the authors account for this wealth of academic data in opposition to their account? In other words, if their claim is that interaction leads to liking, what is it about the interactions between roommates in these investigations that make them lead to less liking?

Real-World Data: Marriage

Consider an additional source of real-world data on familiarity and liking: divorce rates. Married couples, of course, are often

quite similar to each other—indeed, similarity is a key predictor of relationship formation (Byrne, 1971)—and have virtually unlimited opportunities for spontaneous, natural interactions. In addition, unlike online daters—who we agree may be a self-selected group of people—most Americans will be married at some point in their lives. However, as with data from roommates in college, divorce rates suggest that familiarity often does not lead to liking: For marriages that occurred in the 1970s, nearly half—48%—ended in divorce within 25 years. Although divorce rates appear to be declining slightly, some 20% of marriages that took place in the 1990s had already dissolved within just 10 years (Stevenson & Wolfers, 2007). Of course, these percentages reflect only the couples who dislike each other strongly enough to actually get divorced; there are likely other couples who like each other less than when they got married who do not get divorced—though we admit (and hope) that there are some who like each other more.

Real-World Data: Politics

As a final piece of data, consider liking for individuals we do not meet face-to-face, yet about whom we acquire a great deal of information about over time: U.S. presidents. Gallup poll data available for all presidents from Harry Truman to George W. Bush indicate that 10 out of the 11 left with higher disapproval ratings than when they started—many substantially: Truman moved from 5% disapproving to 65%, George H. W. Bush moved from 10% disapproving to 40%, and George W. Bush moved from 25% disapproving to 60%. The trend is true even for presidents we might consider “popular,” with Eisenhower going from 8% disapproving to 28%, and Reagan going from 15% to 30%. (The only exception is Bill Clinton, who merely managed to hold constant at 30% disapproving.)¹ Finally, another recent article showed that people who know the most about Congress like Congress the least (Mondak, Carmines, Huckfeldt, Mitchell, & Schraufnagel, 2007).

Conclusion and Future Directions

Our goal is not to claim that any one of the sources of data reviewed above—college roommates, marriages, politicians, online daters, or laboratory trait paradigms—is the source of data to “trust,” but rather that on the whole, these sources of data point in the direction of more knowledge leading to less liking. Of course, the results of Reis et al. (2011) and some of the articles they cite point in the direction of greater familiarity. We suggest that at minimum, the penultimate statement of Reis et al.—“in spontaneous, everyday social interactions among newly acquainted peers, familiarity does indeed tend to breed liking rather than contempt” (p. 567)—warrants qualification: Their paradigm does not capture spontaneous (their participants are forced to interact) or everyday (chatting about prescribed topics, or online chatting) social interactions, and the data from new college roommates suggest that interactions among newly acquainted peers do not always lead to more liking.

More broadly, however, the claim in Norton et al. (2007) is that familiarity leads to dislike *on average*, but not in every case—indeed, even within in our data, some online daters do show very high liking for their partner after their dates. Surely there are some situations that increase the likelihood that knowing more about someone does lead to more liking—and these may be the kinds of

situations in Reis et al. (2011)’s paradigms—and clearly from the research reviewed above, there are many situations in which knowing more leads to less liking. Our goal in writing this comment was to sketch more fully the various sources of data in favor of and opposed to the notion that “familiarity breeds contempt” in an effort to spur future research that explores the factors that influence the relationship between information and liking, and the psychological mechanisms underlying those relationships.

Although beyond the scope of this short comment, our review of our work, Reis et al. (2011), and the sources of data reviewed above suggest several promising avenues.

The Medium

Even examining just the paradigms in Norton et al. (2007) and Reis et al. (2011), the medium in which people acquire information is vastly different, from reading trait information (somewhat akin to reading information on social networking sites) to chatting online to meeting in the laboratory to meeting for a lunch date. It is very likely, given the differing results of our two articles, as well as the large body of research on the impact of the medium on social interaction (Walther, 1996), that how people acquire information about others will impact the strength and nature of the link between familiarity and liking.

Interaction Goals

When people meet others, they can have many different goals, and these goals likely impact both the processing of information and liking for the other person. Consider merely the difference between two people choosing to meet for an online date (as in Norton et al., 2007) and two randomly assigned partners disclosing information to each other in a laboratory session (as in Reis et al., 2011). In the real world, some of our interactions are chosen (we can approach whoever we want in a crowded bar) and some are not (we are stuck with our siblings). Examining how the perceiver’s goal for the interaction (e.g., “find my life partner” vs. “just get through the holidays with the family”) impacts the link between familiarity and liking is also likely to shed light into the phenomenon.

Familiarity Versus Information

Finally, more research is needed on the underlying mechanisms that predict when familiarity leads to liking and when it leads to contempt. Both Norton et al. (2007) and Reis et al. (2011) cited the seminal work of Zajonc (1968) and related follow-up work (e.g., Moreland & Beach, 1992); these articles—about the positive effects of feelings of familiarity—highlight a critical distinction that is often overlooked, between the feeling of familiarity (e.g., “I feel like I know this person”) and actual familiarity (e.g., “I know information about this person”). Parsing the relative contributions of these two kinds of familiarity—ideally in the same paradigm—would likely be useful in understanding the broader relationship between (kinds of) familiarity and liking.

¹ For graphical representations of these ratings, see http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/United_States_presidential_approval_rating

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