Origins of attraction: sociocultural level of analysis

The analysis of attraction in the previous section can also to some extent explain sociocultural factors in attraction. It seems that people prefer similarity in a partner, as well as a partner who can contribute positively to their own self-esteem. People who live close to one another tend to be similar and so probably also have the same social and cultural norms of what is attractive in a partner. It is worth considering how such social and cultural norms can determine who can become a partner in the first place. It is also worth considering how contact and interaction may influence whom a person is attracted to. Western social psychologists have investigated this for many years. They found that people are attracted to those with whom they have a positive interaction. Several studies have found that frequency of interaction is a good prediction of liking. Festinger et al. (1950) found that friendships in a dormitory tended to form among those who lived near one another. Nahemow and Lawton (1975) found that in homes for the elderly and on college campuses, the distances between rooms predicted friendship and attraction.

Why does simple interaction with others increase liking? First, we compare our feelings and reactions to others so that we can better understand ourselves (Schachter 1959). We test the validity of our views and opinions by comparing them to the view held by others. Second, interaction provides us with a sense of connectedness and attachment. As social animals, this is a basic human need. Finally, the familiar is more likeable than the unfamiliar. This has been demonstrated in research by Zajonc et al. (1971), when researchers asked participants to evaluate photos of strangers. Some of the photos were shown repeatedly during the experiment. Those strangers who were shown more frequently were rated more positively. Zajonc argues that the mere exposure effect increases a sense of trust.

Role of culture in the formation and maintenance of relationships

While interpersonal attraction is at the basis of formation of relationships in western cultures, it is also clear that when attraction diminishes there is a risk of losing interest in a partner and thus ending the relationship. Cultural norms also play an important role in the formation and maintenance of relationships. Moghaddam (1993) has noted that much of the theory and research on the origins of relationships is a reflection of US culture, and not enough cross-cultural research has been carried out. Since our society has become more diverse, it is important that psychologists attempt to look more carefully at the role of culture in relationships.

Goodwin (1995) argues that passionate love is largely a western phenomenon. In the West, marriage is seen as the culmination of a loving relationship. In cultures where arranged marriages occur, the relationship between love and marriage is the other way round. In a conversation about the high US divorce rates with someone from a non-western culture, Matsumoto (2004) noted that he received the following response: The reason for this difference is quite clear. You Americans marry the person you love; we love the person we marry. Gupta & Singh (1992) found that couples in India who married for love.
reported diminished feelings of love if they had been married for more than five years. Those who had arranged marriages reported higher levels of love. Yelsma and Athappilly (1990) compared people from Indian arranged marriages with people from Indian and American love marriages, and found the former to be more satisfied.

Simmons et al. (1986) found that romantic love was valued more in the US and in Germany than in Japan. They argue that romantic love is less valued in more traditional cultures with strong, extended family ties. Dion & Dion (1993) have noted that in traditional societies, marriage is often seen as more than just the union of two individuals; it is held to be a union and alliance between two families. Whereas Americans tend to view marriage as a lifetime companionship between two individuals in love, people of many other cultures view marriage more as a partnership formed in order to have children and for economic and social support.

Levine et al. (1995) found that individualistic countries were more likely to rate love as essential to the establishment of a marriage, and to agree that the disappearance of love is sufficient reason to end a marriage. Countries with a large GDP (Gross Domestic Product—a measure of the total market value of all goods and services produced in a country each year) also showed this tendency. They also found that divorce rates are highly correlated with the belief that the disappearance of love warranted the dissolution of marriage.

In one of the largest cross-cultural studies on relationships ever undertaken, Buss (1994) gave two questionnaires regarding mate selection to more than 10,000 respondents from 37 cultures. There were many striking similarities in the responses. In 36 out of 37 cultures, women ranked financial prospects as more important than males. In all 37, men preferred younger mates, while women preferred older mates. In 23 of the cultures, males rated chastity as being more important than women did. The degree of agreement in sex differences across cultures led Buss to view mate selection preferences as universal, arising from different evolutionary selection pressures on males and females. However, there were some interesting differences:

- **USA**: Love ranked first.
- **Iran**: Love ranked third. Ranked high: education, intelligence, ambition, chastity.
- **Nigeria**: Love ranked fourth. Ranked high: good health, neatness, desire for home and children.
- **China**: Love ranked sixth. Ranked high: good health, chastity, domestic skills.
- **South Africa (Zulu)**: Love ranked seventh. Ranked high: emotional stability and maturity, dependability.

The role of communication in maintaining relationships

Another important factor in the maintenance of relationships seems to be attributional style. In happy relationships, attributions tend to be positively biased towards the partner—that is, positive behaviours are seen as dispositional, and negative behaviours are seen as situational.