

The Diversity of Love Journal

Attraction to Familiar Others

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Something familiar is frequently attractive to us, despite our interest in novelty. It is a persistent pattern of human perception and behavior, which is called the *familiarity principle* ([Reis & Sprecher, 2009](#)).

The principle is rooted in the *mere exposure effect*. We consider familiar situations, objects, actions, and people to be safe and unlikely to be harmful. People commonly like safe environments.

The Familiarity Principle in Relationships

The familiarity principle is important in interpersonal attraction to another person. “*Birds of a feather tend to flock together.*”

Imprinting, familiarity, and similarity use the same psychological mechanism as prototypicality. The perception of familiarity in the appearance of another person emerges due to the perception of his or her prototypicality. A prototypical person triggers attraction and desire for a relationship.

Many studies have shown that people tend to like others who look and behave familiar (e.g., [Moreland & Zajonc, 1982](#); [Peskin & Newell, 2004](#); [Reis et al, 2011](#)).

Familiarity breeds attraction. In general, we like the types of people who appear familiar to us. We have frequently seen them before. They have familiar physical appearances, personalities, and behavioral patterns.

This is one of the major obstacles to interracial and intercultural communication and relationships. So, men and women generally prefer to mingle among those of the same race, ethnicity, faith, and cultural background (Brooks & Neville, 2017).

Early Development of Attraction Preferences

The development of attraction preferences begins in early childhood and takes place on a subconscious level. The environment in which we grew up and the people with whom we spent a lot of time essentially affect our future preferences for boyfriends, girlfriends, and other partners in relationships. Our mother (or grandmother), father (or grandfather), and other close relatives frequently serve as templates for such preferences. The *positive imprinting* and *repeated exposure* to these people increase our attraction to them.

Sexual Imprinting in Children

The phenotype of the opposite-sex caregiver, with whom a child spent much of his or her early years, serves as a prototype for his or her future mate preference. The appearance of any person (a parent, stepparent, or another person) who raised a child for the majority of their formative years plays this role. This is called *positive sexual imprinting* (Berezkei et al., 2002, 2004).

For example, researchers found that women tend to choose spouses that resemble their adoptive fathers. These findings exclude the factor of *genetic similarity* in favor of *imprinting* (Berezkei et al., 2004).

Therefore, our early life experiences can set our mating preferences. In the future, if a man or woman resembles that prototypical person *imprinted* in childhood, for example, a mother or father, then this person may have a better chance of being sexually appealing. Thus, early childhood experience can shape mate preferences, even without being noticed.

As [Fraley and Marks \(2010, p. 1210\)](#) argued,

“beneath the surface, those early experiences are setting the stage for a set of preferences that essentially co-opt early attachment and caregiving experiences in the service of sexuality, leading people to find attractive in others features that are shared by their family members.”

Conscious and Unconscious Effects of Familiarity in Attraction

Three experimental studies have shown that the *effects of familiarity and novelty* on sexual attraction have different directions depending on whether the feeling of familiarity appears from conscious or unconscious sources. Their results showed that when participants were unaware of repeated exposure, the mere exposure effect increased attraction to a target person. However, when participants were aware of the repeated exposure, their attraction to the target person weakened ([Fraley & Marks, 2010](#)).

Thus, familiarity inspires sexual attraction when an individual is not aware of the origins of why another seems familiar. This potential partner may appear novel. However, this novelty is intriguing because the individual perceives in the partner something familiar that is difficult to explain.

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