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The Power of Change: Interpersonal Attraction as a Function of Attitude Similarity and Attitude Alignment

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ABSTRACT. Does attitude alignment predict attraction? Would you like a stranger more who shifts her/his attitudes to more closely align with yours? In pairs, participants \((N=77)\) discussed social issues about which they disagreed and received false feedback on whether the partner engaged in attitude alignment (shifted her/his attitudes toward the participant’s attitude) following discussion. Participants also received false feedback about the proportion of similarity to the partner on a set of issues (i.e., 25%, 50%, or 75%). Participants reported greater attraction to partners who engaged in attitude alignment and who were more similar. Moreover, similarity and attitude alignment interacted. Similarity predicted attraction when attitude alignment did not occur, but did not predict attraction when attitude alignment did occur. Finally, partner attitude alignment led to participant attitude alignment, and perceived reasoning ability mediated the attitude alignment-attraction relationship.

Keywords: attitude alignment, attitude similarity, attraction

IN THE HEAT OF AN ELECTION SEASON, new neighbors Riley Republican and Dana Democrat (not their real names) have a discussion about topics such as legalizing gay marriage. Though they held the expected opposing positions prior to their discussion, Dana was successful in persuading Riley to move closer to her own position in favor of gay marriage. However, the two still held divergent positions on a host of other issues including energy policy, affirmative action, education, budget policy, and more. Dana had a similar discussion with Lee Liberal,
another new acquaintance. They held similar positions on most issues, but not on gay marriage. In contrast to the discussion with Riley, Dana was unable to persuade Lee to modify her position. According to the venerable similarity and attraction literature, Dana would probably like Lee, with whom she shares a high proportion of similar attitudes, though Lee did not move closer to Dana’s position on gay marriage. Similarly, according to this literature, Dana would probably not like Riley, with whom she shares a low proportion of similar attitudes, though Riley moved closer to Dana’s position on gay marriage. But might attitude alignment also exert a significant influence on attraction? Put another way, might attitude alignment on one issue influence attraction as much as the total proportion of similar attitudes across a host of issues? If so, Dana might like Riley as much as, or even more, than Lee.

A robust phenomenon in the psychological literature is the link between attitude similarity and attraction (see Byrne, 1997), but what role does attitude change play in attraction? When confronted by disagreements, individuals often engage in attitude alignment, shifting their attitudes to more closely match those of the partner (Davis & Rusbult, 2001). This process has been characterized as a pro-relationship response to disagreement-induced relational tension and is associated with healthy couple functioning. Though previous research has investigated the role of attitude alignment in ongoing close relationships, this research is the first to examine the influence of attitude alignment on initial attraction. The importance of attitude alignment in predicting attraction may even rival that of attitude similarity, so we examine their joint influence on attraction.

Similarity and Attraction

A well-established link exists between similarity and attraction, with similarity predicting greater attraction whether or not the target individual has desirable personality characteristics (Tenney, Turkheimer, & Oltmanns, 2009). Both friends and romantic partners tend to be similar on a variety of characteristics including demographics, level of physical attractiveness, and personality (Etcheverry & Agnew, 2009; Kandel, 1978; McCrae et al., 2008; Till & Freedman, 1978). Attraction also is linked to similarity in values, personal interests, and political orientations (Luo, 2009). Both actual and perceived similarity influence attraction, though perceived similarity exerts a stronger effect than actual similarity when individuals actually interact (Montoya, Horton, & Kirchner, 2008).

Work in this area has focused particularly on the influence of attitude similarity and attraction (Byrne, 1961a, 1961b; Byrne & Blaylock, 1963; Byrne, Bond, & Diamond, 1969; Byrne & Nelson, 1965; Kandel, 1978; McGarva & Warner, 2003; McGinley, Nicholas, & McGinley, 1978). The relationship between attitude similarity and attraction is linear; a greater proportion of similar attitudes between two strangers results in a greater degree of attraction between them (Byrne & Nelson, 1965), due in part to gains in consensual validation (Byrne & Blaylock, 1963).
1963). Individuals tend to rate strangers with similar attitudes as more attractive, intelligent, and moral than those holding dissimilar attitudes. In addition, they are likely to believe that such strangers have greater knowledge of current events and are better adjusted (Byrne, 1961a, 1961b).

The similarity-attraction link is mediated by several factors, including inferred attraction and cognitive evaluation (Singh, Ho, Tan, & Bell, 2007; Singh, Ng, Ong, & Lin, 2008; Singh, Yeo, Lin, & Tan, 2007). Individuals are attracted to others who they expect will agree with them and in turn be attracted to them (i.e., inferred attraction; Condo & Crano, 1988), and they also are attracted to those whom they view as having higher worth as a person (i.e., cognitive evaluation; Montoya & Horton, 2004). A recent meta-analysis of 240 laboratory studies (Montoya & Horton, 2012) investigated additional mediators. The meta-analysis found some support for Byrne’s reinforcement approach: Individuals holding similar attitudes validate our views and make us feel good, and these positive feelings become associated with the individuals. Greater support was found for an information processing approach: Individuals make inferences about the positive qualities of others based on similarity. Overall, the similarity-attraction link is robust and is explained by both cognitive and affective factors.

**Attitude Alignment and Attraction**

Individuals select close others based on pre-existing similarity, particularly similarity in attitudes. We hypothesize that attitude alignment also will increase initial attraction, as individuals seek to establish balance during relationship formation. Balance theory presents a useful framework for understanding the role of attitude change in attraction by examining the relations between an individual, another individual, and an object or issue. A balanced state occurs when triadic relations among an individual \( p \), another person \( o \), and an attitude object \( x \) are harmonious. Balance occurs when all three relations among \( p, o, \) and \( x \) are positive, or when one relation is positive and two are negative. When the triad is imbalanced, tension exists (Heider, 1958); tension has been hypothesized to be greater when the attitude object \( x \) is considered important and when \( x \) is jointly relevant to \( p \) and \( o \) (Newcomb, 1953, 1959). Shifts toward balance will then likely occur (Heider, 1958). Specifically, individuals’ attitude about the issue \( x \), their perception of the partner’s attitude, or their attraction toward the partner could change to achieve balance (Taylor, 1967).

**Attitude alignment** is the tendency of individuals to shift their attitudes to more closely match the attitudes of another. Individuals engage in the greatest amount of attitude alignment when topics of disagreement are salient and are peripheral (i.e., not important) to individuals’ self-concept, but central (i.e., important) to the other’s self-concept. Individuals are less likely to engage in attitude alignment when issues are central (vs. peripheral) to their self-concept. Though attitude alignment typically is greater for couples, attitude alignment also
has occurred between strangers (Davis & Rusbult, 2001). Why do individuals strive toward similarity? Consistent with balance theory, past research proposes that knowledge of attitude dissimilarity may cause discomfort (Davis & Rusbult, 2001), conflict (Kalmijn, 2005), and negative emotions (Orive, 1988). Shifting attitudes to more closely match the attitudes of a partner may relieve some of the discomfort caused by a disagreement.

Attitude alignment may provide individuals with an opportunity to increase an interaction partner’s liking and acceptance of them. Individuals have a strong desire for social attachments; they readily seek out relationships and fear rejection and exclusion (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). From an evolutionary perspective, group inclusion was beneficial whereas exclusion was costly. Engagement in attitude alignment with another individual may serve an adaptive function that promotes social cohesion and acceptance. Thus, when an individual is alerted that an interaction partner shifted her or his attitudes to align with the individual’s attitudes, it also may serve an affiliative cue and produce attraction for the partner. In support of this notion, individuals expect agreement to produce liking and disagreement to produce disliking (Insko, Sedlak, & Lipsitz, 1982).

Why might a shift toward agreement serve an affiliative cue and produce attraction? Individuals like others who like them (Backman & Secord, 1959). When individuals received information about the proportion of a stranger’s similarity to them as well as the stranger’s judgment of the individual, positive evaluations of the individual had greater impact on attraction than similarity (Byrne & Rhamey, 1965). The impact of positive evaluations in comparison to attitude similarity for predicting attraction has been bolstered by additional research (Bell & Baron, 1974; Byrne & Ervin, 1969; Bryne & Griffitt, 1966; Insko et al., 1973; Singh, 1975; Singh et al., 2007). For instance, in a recent examination of the relationship between attitude similarity and attraction, the previously established positive relationship between attitude similarity and attraction was replicated, but larger effects occurred for reciprocity of liking (Lehr & Geher, 2006). Though receiving information that a stranger has engaged in attitude alignment is not a direct judgment of individuals, attitude alignment likely still contains a more evaluative component than general attitude similarity. When a stranger who was originally in disagreement shifts toward agreement, the shift likely implies a positive reaction to the individual and/or the arguments the individual put forth.

**Overview and Hypotheses**

The role of attitude similarity in predicting attitude change is well documented in the literature. However, relatively little is known regarding the role of attitude change. Thus, we examined the independent and interactive effects of both attitude similarity and attitude alignment on attraction to an interaction partner. We predicted that participants would be more attracted to partners who were more
similar (i.e., had a higher proportion of similar attitudes; Hypothesis 1 \([H1]\)) and who engaged in attitude alignment (vs. did not engage in attitude alignment; \(H2\)). We also expected an interaction between attitude similarity and attitude alignment \((H3)\). Specifically, we expected the simple effect for similarity to be significant in the no attitude alignment condition, but not in the attitude alignment condition. However, we expected the simple effect for attitude alignment to be significant across all similarity conditions. In other words, we expected attitude similarity only to affect attraction when partners had not engaged in attitude alignment, but we expected attitude alignment to affect attraction across all levels of similarity. In a more exploratory vein, we also examined whether perceptions of the aligning partner as having greater reasoning ability, a form of cognitive evaluation, mediates the relationship between attitude alignment and attraction. In addition to assessing participants’ degree of attraction to the partner, we also measured individuals’ amount of attitude alignment toward the partner’s attitude and advanced a parallel set of hypotheses. We expected participants to engage in greater attitude alignment with partners who were more similar (i.e., had a higher proportion of similar attitudes; \(H4\)) and who engaged in attitude alignment (vs. did not engage in attitude alignment; \(H5\)).

**Method**

**Participants**

Undergraduate students \((N = 92; 60\) women, 31 men, 1 did not report) from introductory psychology courses at a large, public, mid-Atlantic university participated for partial course credit. Data from fifteen students that did not fit necessary criteria were removed (see Data Analysis), leaving a final sample of 77 participants (52 women, 25 men) with a mean age of 20.12 years old \((SD = 3.54)\). Participants’ ethnicity varied (White/Caucasian = 38.96%, Black/African-American = 24.68%, Asian = 27.27%, Hispanic/Latino = 1.30%, and Other = 7.79%).

**Procedure**

Participants arrived for a study described as examining personality and interpersonal processes. They participated in randomly assigned pairs with a partner who had been a stranger to them prior to the study. They first completed an attitudes questionnaire in which they reported their position on a variety of issues and the centrality of each issue to their self-concept (Davis & Rusbult, 2001). Then they completed individual difference measures and demographic information.

While participants completed the latter questionnaires, the experimenter selected for discussion two issues about which partners disagreed. Partners were considered to be in disagreement on an issue if their scores differed by six or more
dashes along a 20-point scale, consistent with past research (Davis & Rusbult, 2001). Participants discussed two target issues with the partner—one issue that was central to the self but peripheral to the partner, and one issue that was peripheral to the self but central to the partner. An issue was considered to be central to participants’ self-concepts for ratings of 5 and higher, and an issue was considered peripheral to participants’ self-concepts for ratings of 4 and lower on a 0–8 scale (Davis & Rusbult, 2001). Only issues that were central to self-peripheral to partner and peripheral to self-central to partner were selected. The experimenter instructed participants to refrain from including in discussion any information regarding their responses on other items or questionnaires. Before exiting the room, the experimenter instructed participants to “tell each other how you feel about each issue and why you feel the way that you do.” Participants then spent two minutes discussing each of the two selected issues.

Following the discussion, participants moved to separate rooms and completed the attitudes questionnaire again. The experimenter then delivered false feedback individually to participants regarding the partner’s overall similarity on the attitudes questionnaire and whether or not the partner engaged in attitude alignment following the discussion. Order of similarity and alignment feedback delivery was counterbalanced across participants. Consistent with previous research on similarity and attraction (e.g., Clore & Baldridge, 1968), participants were randomly assigned to be told that the partner agreed with them on 25%, 50%, or 75% of the attitudes expressed via the questionnaire. Participants were told:

I have some information about how similar your partner’s attitudes were to your attitudes overall. You may have noticed that you answered many items about social issues, but only discussed two issues. I have determined how many issues you agreed on and disagreed on overall on the second attitudes questionnaire that you completed. In other words, I’ve determined the percent of the total questions that you and your partner generally agreed upon. It looks like you and your interaction partner agreed on about 25% [50%, 75%] of the issues.

Participants also received feedback regarding the partner’s attitude shift on the issue that was central to them but peripheral to the partner. Participants heard that the partner either did or did not engage in attitude alignment (i.e., shifted their attitude to more closely match the attitude of the participant). Participants in the attitude alignment condition were told:

First, I calculated shift in attitude following your discussion and found that your partner shifted their post-discussion attitudes from their pre-discussion questionnaire in the direction of your attitude. This means that they changed their attitude to more closely match yours after discussing the issue with you. Your partner shifted their attitudes toward yours by more than 5 dashes on the 20-dashed scale. This is a very significant shift toward your position.

Participants in the no attitude alignment condition were told:
First, I calculated the shift in attitude following your discussion and found that your partner did not shift their post-discussion attitude from their pre-discussion questionnaire. This means that their attitude did not change to more closely match yours after discussing the issue with you, but they did not shift to disagree with you more either.

Participants next responded to a questionnaire on their current state (i.e., state self-esteem and affect), their perception of the partner’s reasoning ability, and their attraction to the partner. They also completed several manipulation check questions (e.g., “For the issue on which you received feedback, how much did your interaction partner shift her or his attitude?” on a scale of 1 [shift away from my attitude] to 7 [shift closer to my attitude]; “During the experiment, we told you about the percentage of similar attitudes you shared with your interaction partner. Approximately what percentage [from 0% to 100%] of your interaction partner’s attitudes was similar to your attitudes?”). Finally, participants were fully debriefed about the study’s purpose and the false feedback.

Measures

Attitudes questionnaire. Based on previous attitude alignment research (Davis & Rusbult, 2001), participants completed an attitudes questionnaire containing 51 morality-relevant issues (e.g., “The restaurant which serves my favorite ethnic dishes is fined for exploiting immigrant labor. I would continue to eat there”; “In order to marry someone I love, I must change my religion. I would change my religion”). Participants indicated their attitudes about each issue by placing a check mark along 20 dashed lines ranging from “disapprove” to “approve.” In addition, participants provided information regarding the centrality of each issue to their self-concept (i.e., “Ask yourself how important the issue is, indicating the degree to which the issue is central to who you are and how you think about yourself,” on a scale from 0 [very unimportant] to 8 [very important]). An issue was considered central to a participant’s self-concept for ratings of 5 and higher, and an issue was considered peripheral to a participant’s self-concept for ratings of 4 and lower.

Attraction. Attraction was determined using the Affective Attraction Assessment (Montoya & Insko, 2008). The Affecting Attraction Assessment is a 5-item measure of affective attraction (e.g., “How unpleasant/pleasant do you feel about your partner?”; “How distant/close do you feel to your partner?”; Cronbach’s \( \alpha = .90 \)). Participants provided their responses on a 9-point scale, ranging from 1 (extremely unpleasant) to 9 (extremely pleasant) and 1 (extremely distant) to 9 (extremely close).

Participant attitude alignment. Participant attitude alignment was assessed with a single created items. The item measured of the extent to which participants thought that they had engaged in attitude alignment with their partners
post-discussion (i.e., “After discussion of the issue with your partner, how much did you shift your attitude?”) Participants provided their responses on a 7-point scale, ranging from 1 (shift away from partner’s attitude) to 7 (shift closer to partner’s attitude).

**Perceived reasoning ability.** Perceived reasoning ability was assessing using two created items. These items measured the extent which participants thought their partners had the ability to use reason in decision making (i.e., “My partner is intelligent,” “My interaction partner has the ability to clearly reason when forming judgments”; $\alpha = .87$). Participants provided their responses on a 7-point scale, ranging from 1 (disagree) to 7 (agree).

**Self-esteem and affect.** State self-esteem was assessed using the state self-esteem scale (Leary, Tambor, Terdal, & Downs, 1995). The state self-esteem scale includes 15 adjectives (e.g., good, adequate, attractive) rated according to how participants felt at that moment ($\alpha = .86$). Participants provided their responses on an 11-point scale, ranging from 1 (not at all) to 11 (extremely). Affect was assessed using the Positive and Negative Affect Schedule (PANAS; Watson, Clark, & Tellegen, 1988). The PANAS is a 20-item measure of positive ($\alpha = .89$) and negative affect ($\alpha = .79$). Participants provided their responses on a 5-point scale, ranging from 1 (very slightly or not at all) to 5 (extremely). These measures were included to be ruled out as additional possible mediators for the effect of attitude alignment on attraction.

**Data Analysis**

SAS proc mixed was used to examine the effects of attitude similarity (i.e., 25%, 50%, or 75% similar), attitude alignment (i.e., did or did not engage in attitude alignment), and the interaction between similarity and attitude alignment on attraction while accounting for the nonindependence of the dyadic data due to interaction pairing (Campbell & Kashy, 2002). Fifteen participants were removed from analyses because they either claimed to know their interaction partner prior to the experimental session or because the experimenter was unable to identify issues for the pair that met the disagreement and centrality selection criteria. Data from the remaining 77 participants were included in all analyses.

**Results**

**Initial Analyses**

We first examined the accuracy with which participants recalled the partners’ overall attitude similarity. Of the 77 participants, 91% accurately recalled
their similarity condition when asked at the end of the study. Next, we examined participants’ perceptions of the partners’ degree of attitude alignment based upon their attitude alignment condition. As expected, being told that the partner engaged in attitude alignment significantly affected participants’ perceptions of the partners’ attitude shift, $F(1, 22.2) = 66.15, p < .001$, Cohen’s $d = 2.05$. Participants who were told that the partner engaged in attitude alignment ($M = 5.88, SD = 1.03$) reported greater perceptions that the partner shifted attitudes to more closely match their own than participants who were told that the partner did not engage in attitude alignment ($M = 3.91, SD = 0.89$; 4.00 is the scale mid-point indicating perception of no shift in either away or toward own attitudes).

Using the aforementioned data analysis plan, we conducted analyses to test whether the similarity and attitude alignment manipulations, and their interaction, significantly affected self-esteem and affect, and we examined the effect of sex on attraction. There were no significant main effects or interactions of similarity or attitude alignment on positive affect, negative affect, or self-esteem, with one exception (attitude alignment and similarity interacted to affect self-esteem, but pairwise comparisons revealed no significant differences). Additionally, there were no significant effects involving feedback order or sex (though there was an effect of sex-pairing on attraction).

Impact of Attitude Similarity and Partner Attitude Alignment on Attraction

We next examined the effects of attitude similarity, partner attitude alignment, and the interaction between attitude similarity and partner attitude alignment on attraction. Consistent with $H1$, attitude similarity significantly affected attraction, $F(2, 75) = 3.17, p = .048$. Participants reported greater attraction to partners with 75% similar attitudes ($M = 6.51, SD = 0.96$) than 25% similar attitudes ($M = 5.97, SD = 1.70$), $t(75) = -2.44, p = .04, d = 0.39$. Participants did not report significantly different levels of attraction to partners with 50% similar attitudes ($M = 6.48, SD = 0.85$) than 25% or 75% similar attitudes. Most importantly, and consistent with $H2$, participants reported being attracted to partners who engaged in attitude alignment ($M = 6.55, SD = 0.86$) more than partners who did not engage in attitude alignment ($M = 5.94, SD = 1.65$), $F(1, 75) = 8.38, p < .005, d = 0.46$.

Consistent with $H3$, partner similarity and attitude alignment interacted to influence attraction (see Figure 1), $F(2, 75) = 4.59, p = .01$. The effect of attitude similarity on attraction depended on the level of partner attitude alignment; specifically, attitude similarity predicted attraction when partner attitude alignment did not occur, but did not predict attraction when partner attitude alignment did occur. We performed a linear contrast of the similarity conditions for participants who were told that the partner did not engage in attitude alignment and found that the contrast was significant, $F(1, 11.8) = 7.43, p = .02$, with increasing levels of attraction at increasing levels of similarity. The analogous contrast for participants that were told the partner engaged in attitude alignment was not significant, $F(1,
43) = 0.23, p = .63. Consistent with a great deal of past research, individuals were more attracted to more similar others. However, and consistent with our prediction, this relation only held in the absence of partner attitude alignment.

The effect of partner attitude alignment on attraction similarly depended on the level of attitude similarity. Specifically, when partners were only 25% similar, participants reported greater attraction to partners who engaged in attitude alignment ($M = 6.47$, $SD = 0.93$) than partners who did not engage in attitude alignment ($M = 4.87$, $SD = 2.47$), $t(75) = -3.54$, $p = .009$, $d = 0.86$. However, when partners were 50% or 75% similar, participants reported similar levels of attraction to partners whether or not they engaged in attitude alignment, $p = .29$; $p = .99$, respectively. In other words, participants perceived partners with a low level of similarity as attractive as long as the partner engaged in attitude alignment. Table 1 includes pairwise comparison values. Partner attitude alignment on a single issue appears to have been enough to fully counteract or overwhelm the effect of more general attitude dissimilarity.

**Impact of Attitude Alignment on Perceived Reasoning Ability**

We next examined whether attitude similarity with partner and partner attitude alignment affected participants’ perceptions of the partner’s reasoning ability. Participants perceived partners who engaged in attitude alignment ($M = 7.03$, 25%

FIGURE 1. Interaction of attitude similarity and attitude alignment on attraction.
TABLE 1. Interaction of Attitude Similarity and Attitude Alignment on Attraction Pairwise Comparison Values

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Condition</th>
<th>Condition</th>
<th>t-value</th>
<th>Cohen’s d</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Similarity-attitude alignment</td>
<td>Similarity-attitude alignment</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25%: No alignment</td>
<td>25%: Alignment</td>
<td>−3.54*</td>
<td>0.86</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25%: No alignment</td>
<td>50%: No alignment</td>
<td>−1.34</td>
<td>0.44</td>
</tr>
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<td>75%: No alignment</td>
<td>−3.75*</td>
<td>0.93</td>
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<tr>
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<td>−0.91</td>
<td>0.45</td>
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<td>75%: Alignment</td>
<td>0.35</td>
<td>0.17</td>
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<td>50%: Alignment</td>
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<td>75%: No alignment</td>
<td>−1.76</td>
<td>1.11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>75%: Alignment</td>
<td>1.07</td>
<td>0.64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>75%: No alignment</td>
<td>75%: Alignment</td>
<td>0.65</td>
<td>0.31</td>
</tr>
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Note. No alignment = participant was told attitude alignment did not occur; Alignment = participant was told attitude alignment did occur; p values are presented with Tukey-Kramer adjustment. *p < .01.

SD = 1.34) to have greater reasoning ability than partners who did not engage in attitude alignment (M = 6.30, SD = 1.82), F(1, 30.4) = 5.86, p = .02, d = 0.46. Neither similarity nor the interaction of similarity and attitude alignment significantly affected perceived reasoning ability. Because attitude alignment significantly affected perceived reasoning ability, we examined whether reasoning ability mediated the relationship between attitude alignment and attraction. We conducted bootstrapping analysis to examine the indirect effect of attitude alignment on attraction via perceived reasoning ability using PROCESS (Hayes, 2012), which uses a regression-based path-analytical approach to testing mediation. The model, conducted with 5,000 bootstraps yielded a bootstrap mean estimate of the indirect effect of .38. The 95% confidence interval did not include zero (.04–1.04); thus, we conclude that perceived reasoning ability mediated the relationship between attitude alignment and attraction. Participants who were told their partner engaged in attitude alignment perceived their partner as having greater reasoning ability and, in turn, were more attracted to the interaction partner (see Figure 2).

Impact of Similarity and Partner Attitude Alignment on Participant Attitude Alignment

Do individuals engage in greater attitude alignment if their interaction partner is similar to them, or if their interaction partner has engaged in attitude
alignment? We next examined whether attitude similarity and partner attitude alignment affected individuals’ own likelihood of engaging in attitude alignment on a separate topic. Attitude similarity significantly affected individuals’ attitude alignment, $F(2, 75) = 4.06, p = .02$. Participants engaged in greater attitude alignment with partners who were 50% similar ($M = 5.05, SD = 1.10$) than partners who were 25% similar ($M = 4.28, SD = 1.19$), $t(75) = -1.62, p = .02, d = 0.67$ (the other two pairwise comparisons were not significant). In addition, participants engaged in greater attitude alignment with partners who engaged in attitude alignment ($M = 4.81, SD = 1.01$) than partners who did not engage in attitude alignment ($M = 4.22, SD = 1.10$), $F(1, 75) = 7.09, p = .01, d = 0.56$.

The interaction between attitude similarity and attitude alignment was marginally significant, $F(2, 75) = 2.87, p = .06$ (see Figure 3), and the pattern largely paralleled the results for attraction. The effect of partner attitude alignment on participants’ attitude alignment (marginally) depended on the level of attitude similarity. At low levels of similarity (25% similar), participants engaged in greater attitude alignment with partners who engaged in attitude alignment ($M = 4.65, SD = 0.93$) than partners who did not engage in attitude alignment ($M = 3.44, SD = 1.33$), $t(75) = -3.16, p = .03, d = 1.05$. When partners had a greater degree of similarity, participants engaged in similar levels of attitude alignment whether or not the partners engaged in attitude alignment [50% similar, $p = .54$; 75% similar, $p = .99$]. In other words, participants engaged in attitude alignment toward partners with a low level of similarity as long as the partner engaged in attitude alignment. But at high levels of similarity, participants...
engaged in attitude alignment regardless of partner attitude alignment. See Table 2 for pairwise comparison values.

**Discussion**

Most animals are perceptually wired to notice changes in stimulus intensity. We do not feel our clothes constantly touching our bodies, but notice a mosquito landing on our arm. Changes in brightness or loudness are readily perceived, and moving objects capture attention more than stationary ones. Analogously, the movement of someone’s attitude toward greater similarity on one issue may be as influential on attraction as knowing about static degree of similarity across dozens of issues. Though attitude changes are more abstract than perceptual changes, we nevertheless may be similarly prepared to notice even small changes, perhaps for similar reasons. As it is adaptive to preferentially attend to changes in one’s physical environment, it is adaptive to pay particular attention to changes in one’s social environment. A person who engages in attitude alignment with you sends an important social signal that may help develop or enhance social cohesion.

Attitude alignment is an important predictor of interpersonal attraction: Individuals were more attracted to those who aligned with their own attitude on an issue than those who did not. In addition, attitude similarity may not predict
attraction to the same extent when attitude alignment has taken place. In other words, when individuals receive feedback that a partner with whom they previously disagreed has shifted toward agreement, individuals may rate partners as attractive regardless of their level of overall attitude similarity. This finding is particularly encouraging considering that attitude alignment feedback was based on a single item, whereas overall attitude similarity feedback was based on a proportion of 49 items.

Alignment also can beget alignment. Interestingly, a similar (but only marginally significant) pattern emerged when examining individuals’ own attitude alignment toward the partner. Participants shifted their own attitudes toward the partner’s attitudes when the partner was more similar and with partners who engaged in attitude alignment. If participants received information that the partner was highly similar, participants then engaged in attitude alignment with the partner regardless of the partner’s attitude alignment. However, at low levels of similarity, participants only engaged in attitude alignment when the partners had engaged in attitude alignment, suggesting that partner attitude alignment on a single issue (i.e., 2% of the total number of issues) appears to have been enough to fully overwhelm the effect of low general attitude similarity. Thus, it is possible that alignment on an important issue could contribute to an ever-upward spiral of reciprocal alignment and increased liking by both partners.

These findings hint at the possible greater ecological validity of attitude alignment versus attitude similarity in shaping attraction. When forming new
relationships, it is unlikely for individuals to learn about another’s attitudes, especially a large number of them, in a static way, whereas individuals are likely to engage in dynamic conversations as they meet new people and form new relationships. For instance, Dana Democrat may see a campaign sign in Riley Republican’s yard during election season, but she is unlikely to receive a great deal of information about her new neighbor’s other opinions in a similar manner. Dana is likely to learn much more about Riley’s opinions on a variety of topics during conversations at neighborhood barbeques or school functions.

Previous research (Byrne, 1961a; 1961b; Montoya & Horton, 2004; Singh et al., 2007) examining the relationship between attitude similarity and attraction frequently used a procedure in which participants received written information about a partner’s attitudes (i.e., phantom-other technique). In our experiment, participants received feedback regarding the partner’s attitudes, but also engaged in conversations with the partner, which arguably more closely matches real-world interactions.

Attitude alignment is framed as a pro-relationship behavior which may provide partners with a means of promoting and sustaining healthy functioning in relationships. Attitude alignment was found to be stronger among individuals in ongoing romantic relationships, but attitude alignment also occurred among strangers, suggesting that attitude alignment also may play a significant role in initiating close relationships (Davis & Rusbult, 2001). Though past research identified the circumstances under which attitude alignment is likely to occur (Davis & Rusbult, 2001), it did not assess relationship outcomes. Our study, which involved real and vivid, though brief, conversations, sheds light on this process. From a balance theory perspective, disagreements should produce tension that can cause shifts in the form of attitude change in order to relieve tension and allow the relationship to exist in harmony. Knowing that an interaction partner has shifted toward agreement signals that balance has been obtained. Attitude alignment also may signal that the other person is more agreeable or is more likely to accommodate when there are non-correspondent outcomes (i.e., when individuals have different preferences regarding behavioral options such as which movie to attend). Reduced tension and a perception of harmony in the relationship may allow individuals to react more positively to the partners. They not only feel more attracted to the partners, but they are also likely to engage in their own shifts toward balance as well (i.e., attitude alignment toward the partners).

We theorized that attitude alignment would be more influential in predicting attraction than attitude similarity as a result of the evaluative component of attitude alignment. In the case of attitude similarity, individuals generally like others who are similar to themselves (Byrne 1961a, 1961b), but they did not have any influence on the existence of such similarity—the similarity was pre-existing. Receiving feedback that someone who disagreed now agrees with us is a more active form of feedback and serves as an implicit evaluation of us or our argument. Gain-loss theory may shed some additional light on this effect. Aronson
and Linder (1965) demonstrated that gains in esteem (i.e., receiving few negative evaluations followed by many positive evaluations) produced higher levels of attraction than invariant high esteem (i.e., receiving all positive and no negative evaluations), and suggested that the previous “negative drive state will increase the attractiveness of an individual who has both created and reduced this negative drive state” (p. 157). From the gain-loss perspective, attitude alignment may act as a gain in esteem from others.

However, the gain-loss perspective does not explain why attitude alignment is a strong enough gain to produce high levels of attraction under the condition of low similarity, which could be considered a consistently low negative drive state. Thus, it appears that previous relations found between positive evaluations in comparison to attitude similarity in producing attraction (Byrne & Rhamey, 1965) is a better-suited theoretical framework from which to operate for the current effect. We found that perceived reasoning ability, which can be considered a measure of cognitive evaluation, mediated the attitude alignment-attraction relationship. More specifically, participants who were told the partner engaged in attitude alignment perceived the partner as having higher levels of reasoning ability and, in turn, were more attracted to the partner, which fits the Byrne and Rhamey (1965) framework. It may be useful in future studies to further examine inferred attraction and cognitive evaluation and determine if these variables partially mediate the relationship between attitude alignment and attraction in ways that are similar to their roles in the relationship between attitude similarity and attraction (Condo & Crano, 1988, Singh et al., 2007, 2008). For instance, whether the attitude alignment-attraction relationship can be accounted for by cognitive evaluation or inferred attraction may be moderated by opportunities for future interaction. Attraction may be driven more by inferred attraction if participants expect to interact with the partner in the future, (i.e., partners are perceived as attempting to ingratiate themselves for a smoother relationship), whereas attraction may be driven more by cognitive evaluation if participants do not expect to interact with the partner in the future (i.e., partners are perceived as seeing the error in their argument and making a personal adjustment).

Some limitations should be noted. Because participants met the partner (who was also a participant) face-to-face and had a real conversation about two attitude issues, we were unable to completely control the interaction. It is likely that some pairings and conversations ran more smoothly than others and that other types of similarity (e.g., demographics) may have been apparent in some pairings but not in others. The nature of this research design may also account for the smaller effect of similarity than in previous similarity-attraction research using the phantom-other technique, because other processes (see Byrne, 1992 for a review) may come into play during an actual interaction (that more closely matches the real world) than during the phantom-other technique. However, the pairings were random and thus we expect that these influences would be minimal, and cannot account for
the observed differences in attraction based on attitude alignment and similarity. We also believe that the realistic nature of the interaction provides a strong test of the effect and goes beyond merely providing participants with experimentally-controlled written information about the partner.

Future research also could examine attraction longitudinally to provide a more complete understanding of how attraction unfolds over time based on attitude alignment information (i.e., by measuring attitudes both before and after discussing issues). Future research also may benefit from examining additional potential moderators of the attitude alignment-attraction relation. Our research did not find any differences based on self-esteem or affect, but other variables (e.g., narcissism, power motivation, agreeableness) may play a role and could be examined further.

Furthermore, our research examined interpersonal attraction in a general sense rather than specifically within the context of romantic or sexual relationships. It is possible that the attitude alignment-attraction relation may operate differently (e.g., different variables may moderate or mediate the relationship, effect sizes may vary by relationship type) within romantic and sexual contexts and could be examined by further research in online or speed dating studies. Finally, future research should further examine participants’ own attitude alignment toward their partners (i.e., attitude alignment response) and develop better measures. Our measure for this area of reciprocated attitude alignment consisted of a single item, which can carry greater risk of being psychometrically problematic than measures consisting of multiple items. Future research may benefit from developing additional items to create a more powerful measure of participants’ own attitude alignment.

This research contributes to the literature examining attitudes and attraction by extending the research of Davis and Rusbult (2001) and identifying two outcomes of partner attitude alignment (i.e., attraction and attitude alignment toward the partner). It is particularly intriguing that a shift on a single item has the potential to be more influential than overall attitude similarity on 49 items. This research also provides evidence of a pro-relationship function of attitude alignment, which we believe has great potential as a developing research area. We hope that future research will continue to examine the mechanisms behind this relation.

NOTES

1. Davis and Rusbult found that peripheral to self-central to partner issues produced relatively greater attitude alignment, whereas central to self-peripheral to partner issues yielded an interesting comparison group of lesser attitude alignment. (Issues that were central to both partners or peripheral to both partners were not selected.)
2. It is unlikely that participants would believe feedback that the partners had shifted their attitudes if they learned during discussion that the issue was highly important to the partner (previous attitude alignment research established that individuals are unlikely to shift their attitudes on issues which they consider central to their self).
3. We ran analyses with the seven participants who inaccurately recalled their attitude similarity condition removed, but the pattern of results remained the same. Thus, we chose to keep the participants in the dataset for all analyses.

4. Similarity did not significantly affect self-esteem, positive affect, or negative affect (all $F$s < .32, $p$s > .73). Attitude alignment did not significantly affect self-esteem, positive affect, or negative affect (all $F$s < 1.54, $p$s > .20). Finally, the interaction between similarity and attitude alignment did not significantly affect positive affect or negative affect (all $F$s < 2.30, $p$s > .11), but did affect self-esteem, $F$(2, 75) = 3.37, $p$ = .04. However, further examination of pairwise comparisons revealed no significant effects. We examined the effect of feedback order and sex on attraction in order to rule out any feedback order and sex differences, and found no significant differences in attraction based on feedback order or sex (all $F$s < 2.06, $p$s > .15). We did, however, find a significant effect of sex-pairing (i.e., whether pair of participants were of the same [55.84%] or opposite [44.16%] sex) on attraction. Participants rated the partner as more attractive if the partner was of the same sex ($M = 6.60, SD = 1.03; N = 43$) than if the partner was of the opposite sex ($M = 5.93, SD = 1.48; N = 34$), $F$(1, 22.5) = 5.28, $p = .03, d = .53$.

5. Because initial analyses showed a significant effect of sex pairing, we also ran the main analysis including attitude similarity, attitude alignment, sex pairing, and all possible interactions in the model. Sex pairing did not significantly affect attraction, and it did not significantly interact with either attitude similarity or attitude alignment. The three-way interaction was also not significant (all $F$s < 3.42, $p$s > .05).

AUTHOR NOTES

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