Pergamon

S0147-1767(96)00016-8

SIMILARITY AND ATTRACTION AMONG MAJORITY AND MINORITY GROUPS IN A MULTICULTURAL CONTEXT

LISA M. OSBECK and FATHALI M. MOGHADDAM

Georgetown University, U.S.A.

STEPHANE PERREAULT

McGill University, Canada

ABSTRACT. *As a policy for managing cultural diversity, assimilation has emphasized similarity–attraction, whereas multiculturalism highlights a "celebration of differences". We tested two competing hypotheses, similarity–attraction and similarity–differentiation, among samples from six ethnic groups in Greater Montreal, Canada. Six-hundred and five participants were interviewed by means of an individually administered structured interview procedure conducted by coethnic interviewers. Each participant was asked to indicate the extent to which he/she would be willing to associate with members of the other five ethnic groups, and how similar the other groups were to one's own group. The pattern of relationship observed between social distance and similarity supported the similarity–attraction hypothesis. The relationship was particularly strong when minority groups were rated. Possible interpretations of this finding and implications for culturally diverse societies are discussed. Copyright © 1997 Elsevier Science Ltd*

A major challenge confronting developed and developing societies on the brink of the 21st century is achieving effective strategies for managing

cultural diversity. The traditional integrationist strategy promoted in the U.S. and elsewhere has been severely challenged. Since the 1960s, in particular, we have witnessed a global "ethnic revival" and an emphasis on multiculturalism, rather than assimilation, as a preferred strategy for managing cultural diversity (Moghaddam & Solliday, 1991). This shift is particularly relevant for researchers, because competing psychological assumptions underlie assimilation and multiculturalism (Taylor & Moghaddam, 1994).

A central psychological assumption underlying assimilation has been the similarity–attraction hypothesis, which proposes that perceived similarity leads to attraction. An implication of this hypothesis is that individuals will be positively disposed toward others whom they perceive to be more similar.

An impressive array of psychological theory and empirical research evidence provides support for the similarity–attraction hypothesis at the interpersonal and intergroup levels (Byrne, 1971; Triandis, 1971; Levine & Campbell, 1972; Brown & Abrams, 1986; Byrne, Clore, & Smeaton, 1986; Grant, 1993; Roccas & Schwartz, 1993). This includes classic contributions from Freud (1921), as well as more recent additions to the discussion, such as frustration–aggression theory (Dollard et al., 1939), belief congruence theory (Rokeach, 1960), social comparison theory (Festinger, 1954), balance theory (Heider, 1958), and exchange theory (Homans, 1961). To this list, we may add a considerable body of cross-cultural literature, suggesting that people in different cultures generally show a preference for their own group, and are negatively disposed toward dissimilar others (Levine & Campbell, 1972).

In contrast, a common theme in various interpretations of multiculturalism is the retention and celebration of cultural differences (Berry, 1984; Taylor, 1991). This emphasis on differences or "dissimilarity" poses a challenge to the long-standing similarity–attraction tradition.

There appears to be no direct empirical evidence to support the assumption that maintaining ethnic identity facilitates peaceful intergroup relations. However, this alternative view of the relationship between similarity and attraction does find some support in recent intergroup research (Taylor & Moghaddam, 1994), and particularly the notion of "similarity–differentiation" (Grant, 1993) derived from social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979, 1986). The notion of "similarity–differentiation" starts with a proposition central to social identity theory, that individuals strive to develop a self-concept which is, in part, derived from membership in a social group(s). It is assumed that, as members of a group, individuals are motivated to see themselves as distinct from other groups in order to maintain a clear social identity. When out-groups are too similar, the ability of ingroup members to make comparisons favoring

their own group may be compromised (Brown, 1984). A number of studies have provided at least indirect support for this "similarity–differentiation" view (Giles, 1977; Brown, 1978; Turner, 1978; Turner, Brown, & Tajfel, 1979; Mummenday & Schreiber, 1983; Diehl, 1988; Moghaddam & Stringer, 1988).

The concepts of "similarity–attraction" and "similarity–differentiation" have important implications for policies for managing cultural diversity. They point to different consequences of emphasizing and celebrating differences between groups. However, there is a need for more field research on the role of similarity in intergroup relations among ethnic groups before conclusions can be drawn. In particular, there is a need to examine the role of similarity when some of the groups are ethnic minorities.

The general assumption has been that similarity will play the same role in intergroup relations, regardless of the minority or majority status of the groups involved. An alternative possibility is that similarity will only have an influence when the target is a minority group member. This is because the "normal" pattern of behavior toward the majority status ethnic groups is acceptance, while, for the minority, it is more likely to be rejection. Thus, there is more room for perceived similarity to come into play and to lead to a change from the "normal" pattern of rejection when the target of evaluations is a minority group (Moghaddam, Taylor, & Lalonde, 1987; Moghaddam, 1992).

The present study examines the relationship of perceived similarity to ratings of social distance among ethnic groups in a multicultural setting, some of which represent minorities in this setting. Predictions about the nature of this relationship arise from theories of intergroup relationships involving similarity and out-group bias. According to interpersonal attraction theories, such as that of Dollard et al. (1939) and Rokeach (1960), a general trend of positive association between similarity and social distance is expected. However, according to the "similarity–differentiation" idea (Grant, 1993), it is expected that individuals of a given ethnic group may be motivated to see themselves as distinct from other groups in order to maintain positive social identity. Therefore, negative bias or greater social distance may arise toward those outgroups judged to be more similar.

Two primary research questions, then, are posed in the present study. The first is whether similarity–attraction or similarity–differentiation will better explain the role of similarity in intergroup relations. The second is whether the same pattern of relationships between perceived similarity and social distance will arise for majority and minority groups.

METHOD

Subjects

Participants were English–Canadian ($N = 100$), French–Canadian ($N = 103$), Jewish ($N = 100$), Indian ($N = 100$), Algerian ($N = 102$) and Greek residents of the greater Montreal area. Samples were fairly closely matched on key demographic characteristics, including age, education and sex. The respective statistics are (a) English–Canadian: mean age $= 36.8$, $SD = 15.96$; percentage university educated $= 26.3$; percentage female participants $= 52.5$; (b) French–Canadian: 44.47; 14.28; 26.3; 49; (c) Jewish: 53.77; 20.05; 25; 52; (d) Indian: 43.14; 14.28; 26.3; 49; (e) Algerian: 33.98; 6.79; 35.3; 38.2; Greek: 40.32; 13.21; 18.6; 52.4. Respondents were selected through networks of ethnic organizations, schools and networks of our contacts in ethnic communities throughout Montreal.

Procedure and Materials

Attitudes toward similarity and social distance were assessed by means of an individually administered structured interview, which included measures of willingness to associate with other groups and perceived similarity to other groups.

Perceived Similarity. Respondents were asked to rate the extent to which they perceived other groups as similar to or different from their own group on the characteristics: (a) hard-working, (b) friendliness, (c) family life, (d) group orientation and (e) trustworthiness. Ratings ranged from 1 (very similar) to 9 (very similar) for each characteristics.

Social Distance. Respondents were asked to rate the extent to which they would be willing to associate with each of the other represented groups: (a) as a family member through marriage, (b) as a close personal friend, (c) as a neighbor, (d) as a fellow worker and (e) as a citizen of Canada. Ratings were made on a Likert-type scale with values ranging from 1 (not at all) to 9 (to a great extent).

Each interview was conducted individually in the home of the respondent by a coethnic interviewer who was bilingual (fluent in English and the language of the respondent) and also bicultural (familiar with both the culture of the "Canadian mainstream" and the culture of the respondent).

A structured interview procedure was used which had been tested and refined in other studies of visible minorities (Moghaddam & Taylor, 1987; Moghaddam, Taylor, & Lalonde, 1987; Moghaddam & Perreault, 1992). In this procedure, the interviewer retained the questionnaire, read the

questions to the respondent and recorded the responses given. Respondents had in front of them a booklet of rating scales and had the task of selecting each response from these scales. All interviewers participated in a training program designed to increase sensitivity to potential interviewer bias and demand characteristics. Interviewers typically attended at least three training sessions in which research interests and translation issues were discussed. An average of not more than 15 interviews were conducted by each interviewer in order to minimize bias that might arise through the influence of any particular interviewer not identified through interview screening. Respondents were informed that their answers would be treated as confidential. However, interviewers were required to provide telephone numbers of respondents and follow-up debriefing interviews were conducted with respondents.

Data Analysis. Pearson correlation coefficients were obtained between a "total" similarity index and scores for each of five levels of social distance. The "total" similarity index was computed by combining scores on the five similarity measures. The Cronbach Alpha reliability coefficient of the similarity indices ranged between .76 and .87.

RESULTS

Relationship Between Perceived Similarity and Social Distance

Overall trends indicated that, as perceived similarity increased, respondents indicated a greater willingness to associate with other groups. This general picture is complicated by the lack of significant correlations

TABLE 1

Relationship Between Perceived Similarity and Social Distance for English–Canadians

	Most French– Canadians	Most Greek– Canadians	Most Algerian– Canadians	Most Indian– Canadians	Most Jewish– Canadians
As a family member through marriage?	.28**	.30**	.25*	.40**	.39**
As a close personal friend?	.24*	.20	.34**	.46**	.26**
As a close neighbor?	.27**	.20	.49**	.48**	.30**
As a fellow worker?	.26*	.17	.43**	.49**	.23*
As a citizen of Canada?	.15	.16	.49**	.34**	.18

$*p < .05$; $**p < .01$.

TABLE 2

Relationship Between Perceived Similarity and Social Distance for French-Canadians

	Most English– Canadians	Most Greek– Canadians	Most Algerian– Canadians	Most Indian– Canadians	Most Jewish– Canadians
As a family member through marriage?	.18	.22*	.34**	.44**	.30**
As a close personal friend?	.26*	.37**	.39**	.59**	.27*
As a close neighbor?	.26*	.32**	.33**	.47**	.35**
As a fellow worker?	.25*	.32**	.32**	.51**	.41**
As a citizen of Canada?	.17	.29**	.40**	.55**	.38**

*p < .05; **p < .01.

TABLE 3

Relationship Between Perceived Similarity and Social Distance for Greek-Canadians

	Most English– Canadians	Most French– Canadians	Most Algerian– Canadians	Most Indian– Canadians	Most Jewish– Canadians
As a family member through marriage?	.17	.11	.43**	.22*	.11
As a close personal friend?	.33**	.29**	.40**	.35**	.34**
As a close neighbor?	.23*	.29**	.43**	.42**	.20*
As a fellow worker?	.30**	.35**	.35**	.44**	.26**
As a citizen of Canada?	.24*	.27**	.31**	.39**	.26**

*p < .05; **p < .01.

between perceived similarity and social distance for English–Canadians toward Greek–Canadians; Indian–Canadians toward English–Canadians, French–Canadians and Jewish–Canadians; and Jewish–Canadians toward English–Canadians and Greek–Canadians. There were only two significant negative correlations. These were both obtained for the Jewish–Canadian group, first on their willingness to associate with French–Canadians as fellow workers and second on their willingness to accept Algerians as citizens of Canada.

Target Group. The highest correlations between similarity and social distance were consistently obtained when the target groups were Algerian

TABLE 4

**Relationship Between Perceived Similarity and Social Distance for
Algerian–Canadians**

	Most English– Canadians	Most French– Canadians	Most Greek– Canadians	Most Indian– Canadians	Most Jewish– Canadians
As a family member through marriage?	.00	.01	.00	.40**	.04
As a close personal friend?	.17	.29**	.28**	.46**	.24*
As a close neighbor?	.18	.35**	.25*	.48**	.40**
As a fellow worker?	.28**	.41**	.21*	.49**	.42**
As a citizen of Canada?	.31**	.45**	.15	.34**	.48**

*p < .05; **p < .01.

TABLE 5

**Relationship Between Perceived Similarity and Social Distance for
Indian–Canadians**

	Most English– Canadians	Most French– Canadians	Most Greek– Canadians	Most Algerian– Canadians	Most Jewish– Canadians
As a family member through marriage?	.08	.17	.22*	.24*	.08
As a close personal friend?	.11	.06	.32**	.34**	.10
As a close neighbor?	.02	.06	.30**	.49**	.17
As a fellow worker?	.20	.10	.36**	.43**	.19
As a citizen of Canada?	.14	−.08	.44**	.49**	.27*

*p < .05; **p < .01.

and Indian–Canadians. For Francophones and Algerians, higher
correlations were also obtained in ratings of Jewish–Canadians.

DISCUSSION

The objective of this study was to examine the relationship between
perceived similarity and social distance among samples of minority and
majority groups in a multicultural context. Since Canada was the first
country in the world to officially adopt a multicultural policy (in 1972), we

TABLE 6

Relationship Between Perceived Similarity and Social Distance for Jewish–Canadians

	Most English– Canadians	Most French– Canadians	Most Greek– Canadians	Most Algerian– Canadians	Most Jewish– Canadians
As a family member through marriage?	.12	.12	.10	.23*	.31**
As a close personal friend?	.15	.38**	.15	.48**	.27*
As a close neighbor?	.14	.27**	.18	.43**	.35**
As a fellow worker?	.13	−.39**	.25	.52**	.41**
As a citizen of Canada?	.05	.29**	.16	−.40**	.38**

$*p < .05; **p < .01.$

were particularly interested in better understanding the situation of minority and majority groups in the Canadian context. Specifically, we addressed two research questions: (1) Does similarity–attraction or similarity–differentiation better explain the relationship between similarity and social distance? (2) Is the pattern of relationship between similarity and social distance the same when the targets are minority and majority groups?

In response to the first research question, the overall pattern of data makes clear that, irrespective of the majority or minority status of the out-group, a greater perceived similarity is associated with a greater willingness to associate with ethnic outgroups. Hence the results are broadly supportive of the similarity–attraction hypothesis (Byrne, 1971; Triandis, 1971; Grant, 1993). These results do not add support to the "similarity–differentiation" idea that a need for distinctiveness will lead people to distance themselves from more similar outgroups.

In response to the second question posed, namely whether the pattern of relations between similarity and attraction is the same for both majority and minority outgroups, our results are also quite clear. While the relationship between similarity and attraction is positive for both majorities and minorities, the data suggest that the relationship between these variables is stronger when minority group members are the target. Across respondents, similarity and social distance were most strongly associated when ratings were made for Indian– and Algerian– Canadians — the two most "visible" minorities in our samples.

The results of this study may contribute to the discussion of psychological assumptions underlying multiculturalism, both in countries such

as Canada where multiculturalism is official government policy and in countries, such as the U.S., where it does not enjoy the same "official" status but is still highly influential. A central theme of multiculturalism is the value of retaining, strengthening and "celebrating" cultural differences. Indeed, "celebrating differences" seems to be becoming an even more pervasive slogan as we approach the 21st century.

The "celebration of differences" and other facets of multiculturalism that emphasize *dissimilarity* of outgroups may lead us to a dilemma. The vast bulk of the research evidence, including the result of this study, shows a clear pattern of relationship between perceived similarity and attraction at both interpersonal- and intergroup levels.

In the short term, then, we seem to be faced with a dilemma. On the one hand, multiculturalism is leading to a greater focus on intergroup differences, and even perhaps in some cases, a construction and exaggeration of differences that did not previously exist. On the other hand, the existing research evidence suggests that, even in "officially" multicultural societies, such as Canada, people are most positively disposed toward out-groups which they perceive to be more similar, and this trend seems to be accentuated when the outgroup is a visible minority. Clearly, more research attention needs to be given to this issue, because it is of fundamental importance to both theory and practical policy-making in culturally diverse societies.

REFERENCES

BERRY, J. W. (1984). Multicultural policy in Canada: A social psychological analysis. *Canadian Journal of Behavioral Science*, **16**, 353–370.

BROWN, R. (1978). Divided we fall: An analysis of relations between sections of a factory workforce. In H. Tajfel (Ed.), *Differentiation between social groups* (pp. 395–429). London: Academic Press.

BROWN, R. J. (1984). The role of similarity in intergroup relations. In H. Tajfel (Ed.), *The social dimension* (Vol. 2, pp. 603–623). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

BROWN, R. J., & ABRAMS, D. (1986). The effects of intergroup similarity and goal interdependence on intergroup attitudes and task performance. *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, **22**, 21–33.

BYRNE, D. (1971). *The attraction paradigm.* New York: Academic Press.

BYRNE, D., CLORE, G. L., & SMEATON, G. (1986). The attraction hypothesis: Do similar attitudes affect anything? *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, **51**, 1167–1170.

DIEHL, M. (1988). Social identity and minimal groups: The effects of interpersonal and intergroup attitudinal similarity on intergroup discrimination. *British Journal of Social Psychology*, **27**, 289–300.

DOLLARD, J., DOOB, L., MILLER, N., MOWRER, O., & SEARS, R. (1939). *Frustration and aggression.* New Haven: Yale University Press.

FESTINGER, L. (1954). A theory of social comparison processes. *Human Relations*, 7, 117–140.

FREUD, S. (1921). Group psychology and the analysis of the ego. In J. Strachey (Ed. & trans.), *The standard edition of the complete works of Sigmund Freud*. London: Hogarth Press.

GILES, H. (1977). *Language, ethnicity, and intergroup relations.* London: Academic Press.

GRANT, P. R. (1993). Reactions to intergroup similarity: Examination of the similarity-differentiation and the similarity-attraction hypotheses. *Canadian Journal of Behavioral Science*, 25, 28–44.

HEIDER, F. (1958). *The psychology of interpersonal relations.* New York: John Wiley.

HOMANS, G. C. (1961). *Social behavior: Its elementary forms.* New York: Harcourt, Brace & World.

LEVINE, R. A., & CAMPBELL, D. T. (1972). *Ethnocentrism: Theories of conflict, ethnic attitudes, and group behavior.* New York: John Wiley.

MOGHADDAM, F. M. (1992). Assimilation et multiculturalisme: Le cas des minorités à Quebec. *Revue Québécoise de Psychologie*, 13, 140–157.

MOGHADDAM, F. M., & PERREAULT, S. (1992). Individual and collective mobility strategies among minority group members. *Journal of Social Psychology*, 132, 343–357.

MOGHADDAM, F. M., & SOLLIDAY, E. A. (1991). "Balanced multi-culturalism" and the challenge of peaceful coexistence in pluralistic societies. *Psychology and Developing Societies*, 3, 51–72.

MOGHADDAM, F. M., & STRINGER, P. (1988). Outgroup similarity and intergroup bias. *Journal of Social Psychology*, 128, 105–115.

MOGHADDAM, F. M., & TAYLOR, D. M. (1987). The meaning of multiculturalism for visible minority immigrant women. *Canadian Journal of Behavioral Science*, 19, 121–136.

MOGHADDAM, F. M., TAYLOR, D. M., & LALONDE, R. N. (1987). Individualistic and collective integration strategies among Iranians in Canada. *International Journal of Psychology*, 22, 301–313.

MUMMENDEY, A., & SCHREIBER, H. J. (1983). Better or just different? Positive social identity by discrimination against, or by differentiation from outgroups. *European Journal of Social Psychology*, 13, 389–397.

ROCCAS, S., & SCHWARTZ, S. H. (1993). Effects of intergroup similarity on intergroup relations. *European Journal of Social Psychology*, 23, 581–595.

ROKEACH, M. (1960). *The open and closed mind.* New York: Basic Books.

TAJFEL, H., & TURNER, J. C. (1979). An integrative theory of intergroup conflict. In W. G. Austin & S. Worchel (Eds.), *The social psychology of inter-group relations* (pp. 33–47). Montery, CA: Brooks/Cole.

TAJFEL, J. & TURNER, J. C. (1986). The social identity theory of intergroup behavior. In S. Worchel & G. Austin (Eds.), *Psychology of intergroup relations* (pp. 7–24). Chicago: Nelson-Hall.

TAYLOR, D. M. (1991). The social psychology of racial and cultural diversity: Issues of assimilation and multiculturalism. In A. G. Reynolds (Ed.), *Bilingualism, multiculturalism, and second language learning* (pp. 1–19). Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.

TAYLOR, D. M., & MOGHADDAM, F. M. (1994). *Theories of intergroup relations*. Westport, CT: Praeger.

TRIANDIS, H. C. (1971). *Attitudes and attitude change*. New York: John Wiley.

TURNER, J. C. (1978). Social categorization and social discrimination in the minimal group paradigm. In H. Tajfel (Ed.), *Differentiation between social groups* (pp. 101–140). London and New York: Academic Press.

TURNER, J. C., BROWN, R. J., & TAJFEL, H. (1979). Social comparison and group interest in ingroup favoritism. *European Journal of Social Psychology*, **9**, 187–204.