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THE EFFECTS OF FRUSTRATION AND SOCIAL DESIRABILITY ON HETEROSEXUAL ATTRACTION

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Walster, Walster, Piliavin and Schmidt's (1973) finding that a selectively hard-to-get female was preferred over either an easy-to-get or a hard-to-get female was replicated for unfrustrated males. However, when males were mildly frustrated, they preferred females who had indicated attraction toward them. The implications of these results were discussed in terms of external rewards and the motivational state of individuals.

A supposition frequently cited deals with the appeal of the socially desirable but elusive individual. Literary references to the person whose aloofness and lack of interest in a suitor only serve to heighten his or her appeal are numerous, as reflected by such maxims as "the love that lasts longest is the love that is never returned," the "easy attainment of love makes it of little value or difficulty of attainment makes it prized" (Capellanus, 1969). Apparently for the non-scientist, the phenomenon of increased attraction for the hard-to-get individual is obvious.

In the area of more scientific observation, however, the appeal of the elusive individual has not always been empirically supported. In fact, the several experiments which have been conducted investigating the effect of elusiveness on subsequent attraction have found no significant results. Walster, Walster, Piliavin, and Schmidt (1973) reported several experiments designed to demonstrate that a hard-to-get female would be better liked than an easy-to-get female. In spite of the varied manipulations, it was found that males were similarly attracted to the hard-to-get and easy-to-get females. In a final attempt to understand their previous failures, Walster, et al. (1973) contrasted liking not only for the hard-to-get date

against the easy-to-get date, but also included the condition of a selectively hard-to-get date. This individual was conceived as being hard for anyone else to get, but easy for the subject to obtain. Again using the context of a computer dating center, males were given information folders about five females who had been matched with them by a computer. Included in the folders was each female's rating of the subject and four other fictitious males. In the hard-to-get condition, the female had rated all the men neutrally: not greatly attracted to any of them but not negative, either. In the easy-to-get condition, the female indicated that she liked all five men. While two of the females had made no choice preferences, the selectively hard-to-get female, expressed a liking toward the subject and was neutral towards all others. The results showed that the men preferred the selectively hard-to-get female over either the hard-to-get or easy-to-get females; the latter two preferences did not significantly differ from each other.

The authors analyzed the situation in terms of the assets and liabilities possessed by each of the stimulus females. The elusive, or hard-to-get, female possesses several assets that may be highly valued by another person. From previous experience, the potential suitor

apparently has learned that there is more competition for something only if it is socially desirable. The elusiveness of the hard-to-get individual comes to be associated with high social value, and obtaining such a goal becomes highly rewarding to the suitor. However, the hard-to-get female has numerous liabilities. Because of her highly desirable assets, she can be very selective in her choices of males. This is not only frustrating to the potential suitor, but it lowers the probability of mutually rewarding experiences. Hence, for most males, the attainment of a hard-to-get female is not likely to be realized. The easy-to-get female is also not selected by a suitor because she is indiscriminate in her praise of others. While she is easy to obtain, she is not very highly valued. In contrast, the selectively hard-to-get female is highly valued because she is perceived as having the assets of both the hard-to-get and the easy-to-get female with none of their liabilities. She is perceived as having the same desirable qualities of the hard-to-get female with the easy-to-get female's asset of easy attainment. Hence, she is perceived as a very desirable source of attraction.

One important aspect of the Walster, et al. (1973) findings is that attraction was not based solely on a reciprocity-of-liking rule, which states that we like those who like us (Berscheid & Walster, 1969). Both the easy-to-get and selectively hard-to-get females liked the male, but the latter was definitely preferred over the former, and the easy-to-get female was liked as much as the hard-to-get female even though the latter did not indicate a liking for the male.

The purpose of the present experiment was twofold: (1) Replicate the findings for the hard-to-get, easy-to-get and selectively hard-to-get females obtained by Walster et al. (1973); (2) Determine if the same relationships would hold after the subjects had been mildly frustrated. The rationale for the latter was based on findings by Dittes (1959) and Walster (1965) that an individual is more attracted to an affectionate other when his self-esteem

had been momentarily lowered than when it had been temporarily raised. We hypothesized that mildly frustrating subjects would have a similar effect. That is, subjects who were led to believe that they would "meet" their computer dates, but then had the meeting postponed, would be more attracted to females who liked them than those males who were confronted with their "computer matches" as anticipated; the latter subjects would prefer this selectively hard-to-get female. Furthermore, it was expected that the frustrated males would especially dislike the hard-to-get female because she is already a source of frustration, even without additional frustrating events.

METHOD

Subjects. A total of 45 male undergraduates from a large southern university participated in the experiment, 15 in the control condition, and 15 in each of the experimental conditions. All were volunteers recruited from the Introductory Psychology subject pool, and all received research credits for their participation.

Procedure. When subjects reported for the experiment, entitled "Computer Prediction of Interpersonal Attraction," they were asked by the experimenter to complete a questionnaire in a small laboratory room which contained 20 to 30 boxes of data cards, computer read-outs, and an IBM card puncher. The experimenter read the subjects their instructions, which outlined the purpose of the experiment as being a test of the efficacy of computer prediction of interpersonal attraction as compared to the individual's own judgments. Questions used on the questionnaire form were adapted from *Measures of Social Psychological Attitudes* (Robinson & Shaver, 1969) and were selected for high face validity in the area of person perception, tastes, and sentiments, relating in obvious ways to attitudes towards self and others. The form consisted of a series of statements followed by 5-point rating scales ranging from "strongly agree" to "strongly disagree." Participants were instructed to answer each question on both the questionnaire form itself and on a separate standard IBM answer sheet provided. When the subject had completed the questionnaire form, he was given his next appointment time, usually scheduled four to seven days later, and the experimenter explained that the delay was necessary to allow time to get the data into the computer file.

When the subject arrived at this second appointment time, he watched as the experimenter, using a ComData Corporation Series 33 teletype terminal, called a program entitled Computer Match and typed in the subject's name, number, and sex. For the control subjects, the computer printed out 20 lines of statistical and computer jargon, followed by the numbers of four females that matched the subject. The subject was then taken to a small room where he was given four computer match numbers. Each of the folders contained a questionnaire form, which had apparently been completed by the stimulus females. Following Walster et al. (1973), the forms had actually been completed in such a way that they varied insignificantly from one another, as further indicated by control subjects showing no preferences among the females.

After signing a "commitment form" requiring him to keep in confidence any information about his partners he might learn, the subject was asked to read the four females' answers to the questionnaire, and to complete a "first impression form" for each of the females. Next, subjects were asked to select the individual with whom they chose to interact, answering on the "partner selection form." This form contained the subject numbers of each of the four stimulus females followed by an 11 point rating scale ranging from "definitely do want to interact with" at +5 to "definitely do not want to interact with" at -5.

Experimental Conditions. Experimental subjects were treated just as the control subjects, except that three of the four folders contained, in addition to the questionnaire form, a "partner selection form" supposedly completed by the females. On this form the woman had apparently rated the subject and three other men as well, all identified by subject number only. This form was the means by which subjects learned how the prospective

partner rated both him and three other individuals. Of the four stimulus females evaluated, one had no such form, one was easy-to-get, one was hard-to-get, and one was selectively hard-to-get. The easy-to-get female rated all four men as desirable partners in interaction (mean = +3.75), including the subject who was rated at +4. The hard-to-get female rated all men positively, but low on the scale (mean = +0.75), with the subject receiving a rating of +1. The selectively hard-to-get female rated three other prospective partners at either +1 or +2, while the subject received a rating of +4.

Frustration was manipulated by requiring half of the subjects to return to the laboratory another time. These subjects, like all the other subjects, watched the experimenter call the program, but instead of receiving the four match numbers at the end of the program, the computer reported an error due to incorrect loading of input and terminated the program. The experimenter apologized to the subject for the inconvenience and delay, and arranged another appointment time with the promise that the error would be corrected by then. At this next appointment time, usually five to seven days later, the subject was treated like the unfrustrated subjects.

Dependent Measures. The dependent measures consisted of subjects' responses on the "partner selection form" which they completed for each of the stimulus females. Measures of perceived assets and liabilities were taken from the subjects' responses on the "first impression form." This form consisted of seven sets of bipolar adjectives (friendly-unfriendly, warm-cold, attractive-unattractive, selective-nonselective, popular-unpopular, exciting-boring, easy going-rigid), all of which could be answered on a 7-point scale. All subjects were then fully debriefed.

TABLE 1

Heterosexual Attraction
as a Function of Experimental Conditions

	Hard	Easy	Selective	Overall
Frustrated	-.07	2.13	2.20	1.42
Unfrustrated	1.13	1.33	2.46	1.64
Overall	.53	1.73	2.33	

Note: Means may vary from -5.0 to +5.0; higher numbers indicate greater attraction.

RESULTS

The means of the experimental subjects' heterosexual preferences for the stimulus females are presented in Table 1. The data were analyzed by a 2 × 3 analysis of variance with repeated measures on the second factor (Winer, 1971). The results showed overall difference in attraction for the stimulus females, $F(2,56) = 40.00$, $p < .01$. Subsequent comparisons using the Newman-Keuls procedure indicated that the hard-to-get female was liked less than either the easy-to-get or the selectively hard-to-get females; the latter two did not differ from each other (comparisons at the .05 level of significance). In addition, the attraction for the stimulus females varied with whether or not the subject had been frustrated, $F(2,56) = 11.09$, $p < .01$. For the unfrustrated subjects, the Walster, et al. (1973) findings were replicated. The subjects preferred the selectively hard-to-get female over the easy- or hard-to-get females, which did not differ from each other (Newman-Keuls, $p = .05$). However, as predicted, the subjects in the frustrated condition rated the hard-to-get female more negatively than the subjects in the unfrustrated condition, and the frustrated subjects liked equally both the easy-to-get and the selectively hard-to-get females (Newman-Keuls, $p = .05$). In short, in contrast to the unfrustrated subjects, the frustrated subjects' attraction toward the females was determined by whether or not the females had indicated attraction toward them.

A 2 × 3 analysis of variance with repeated measures on the second factor, and a subsequent Newman-Keuls test showed that the subjects rated the easy-to-get and hard-to-get females as having fewer assets and more liabilities than the selectively hard-to-get female, $F(2,56) = 16.85$, $p < .01$. Overall, the means for the bipolar adjectives were 37.73, 37.26, 40.23, respectively.

DISCUSSION

For the unfrustrated subjects, the ratings of attraction were solely based on the social desirability of the stimulus females. These subjects overwhelmingly preferred the selectively hard-to-get female who was perceived as having more assets and fewer liabilities than either the hard-to-get or easy-to-get females; there were no differences in attraction for the hard-to-get and easy-to-get females who were perceived as having similar assets and liabilities. On the other hand, the attraction of the frustrated subjects toward the stimulus females was not determined by social desirability but, instead, by whether or not the females had expressed a liking toward them. The easy-to-get female was liked as much as the selectively hard-to-get female, in spite of the fact that the latter was perceived as having more assets and fewer liabilities. Moreover, the frustrated subjects liked the hard-to-get female even less than the unfrustrated subjects, although she was perceived as being as desirable as the easy-to-get female.

The results of the present experiment clearly demonstrate the importance of specifying antecedent events to determine when particular stimuli will function as reinforcers, a view made repeatedly by Lott and Lott (1974). For example, in general, individuals prefer those persons who like them over those persons who do not. However, the present results, as well as those of Walster, et al. (1973) have shown that a male, under normal circumstances, who is presented with females varying in social desirability, will usually be attracted to the most desirable one, in spite of the fact that a less desirable female may also be interested in him. Apparently the attraction for those females is made on the basis of perceived assets and liabilities rather than solely on a reciprocity of liking rule. But, if the male is frustrated, the specific aspects of the females that serve as the reinforcer are different. In this case, the male is more concerned about being liked (and not being disliked) and is less concerned about the source of the attraction than is a male who has not been

frustrated. No doubt there are limits to this finding, but the evidence indicates that a frustrated male is particularly susceptible to praise from others, even from those who vary in social desirability. In short, in order to understand interpersonal attraction from a reinforcement viewpoint, we need to know the motivational state of the organism, as well as the external reinforcing stimuli (Aronson, 1969; Berscheid & Walster, 1974; Dittes, 1959; Jones, 1964; Lott & Lott, 1974; Walster, 1965).

Four possible limitations of the findings need to be mentioned. First, the source of frustration in the present experiment did not stem directly from the stimulus females. The attraction toward a given person(s) may very well depend upon the magnitude of associated or unassociated frustration (in the former case the object of potential attraction is responsible for the frustration; in the latter case, the object of attraction, as in the present case, is unrelated to the frustration). Second, the data apply only to males, and females may show different preferences. Third, the findings may be limited to presenting subjects with females varying in social desirability (a between subjects design may produce different findings), and finally, the present paradigm may be inadequate in testing the hypothesis that the elusive or hard-to-get female is especially admired. That is, the findings of the present experiment may be limited to the single exposure of males to females varying in social desirability and may not hold upon repeated exposures. It seems to us that a more accurate test of the hypothesis, albeit with difficulties involved, would necessitate the repeated interactions of individuals engaged in heterosexual behavior. Each of these potential limitations is intriguing and worthy of further research.

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