

Factors affecting attraction in romantic relationships:

Self-disclosure

Physical attractiveness including the matching hypothesis

Filter theory, including social demography, similarity in attitudes and complementarity

Self-disclosure

Refers to the sharing of personal information. In a relationship this is how much personal information you are prepared to reveal about yourself with your partner. Romantic partners reveal more about their true selves as the relationship develops. Self-disclosure can strengthen a romantic bond when used appropriately. Self-disclosure has a vital role in a relationship beyond the initial attraction, it can help people feel more secure in a relationship and feel valued by their partner.

Altman and Dalmás (1973) refer to this in their 'social penetration' theory. They suggest that self-disclosure has both depth and breadth, and as these increase, partners feel more committed to each other. This process of revealing deep and meaningful thoughts help build the foundations of a strong emotional connection. When one partner reveals something personal, they are signalling that they trust the other person, as they each share personal or intimate details, they penetrate more deeply into each other's lives.

Sprecher and Hendrick (2004) found strong correlations between several measures of satisfaction and self-disclosure for both partners. Those who self-disclosed more information with their partner were more satisfied and committed to their relationship.

Reis and Shaver (1988) argue that for a relationship to develop, increasing in depth and breadth there must be a reciprocal element to disclosure. If there is a balance of self-disclosure between both partners, it is more likely that they will develop deeper feelings of intimacy and more connection to each other. However, this can be subject to cultural differences, particularly between individualistic and collectivist cultures.

Physical Attractiveness

Physical attractiveness is an important factor in the formation of romantic relationships. There tends to be general agreement within cultures about what is considered physically attractive, and we seek to form a relationship with the person we find most attractive.

The Halo effect is used to describe how physical attractiveness tends to influence our judgement of attributes such as personality. Dion (1972) claimed that physically attractive people are consistently rated as kind, strong, sociable unsuccessful compared to unattractive people. In addition, Palmer and Peterson (2012) found that physically attractive people were rated as politically knowledgeable and competent compared to unattractive people, even when these 'knowledgeable' people had no particular experience.

The Matching Hypothesis

Walster and Walster (1969) devised the matching hypothesis which suggests that we look for partners who are similar to ourselves in terms of physical attractiveness. We tend to seek and choose partners whose attractiveness matches our own. For example, if we judge ourselves as a 7 out of 10, then we are likely to seek a mate of a similar level of attractiveness. We view those outside of this league as unattainable, so would risk rejection if we kept trying to pursue a relationship with someone, we viewed as more attractive.

However, in a real-life study of online daters, Taylor et al (2011) found that online daters sought out interactions with potential partners who were more physically attractive than themselves. This contradicts the matching hypothesis.

Filter Theory

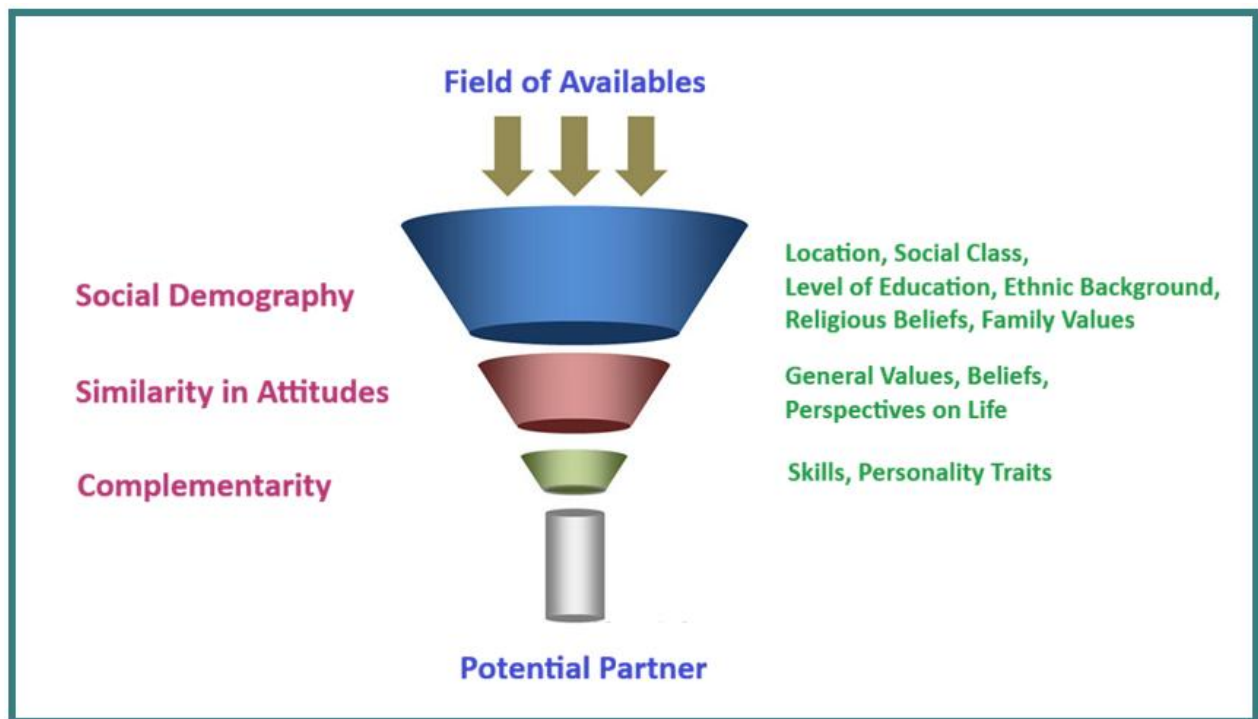
Kerckhoff and Davis (1962) compared the attitudes and personalities of student couples in short-term (less than 18 months) and long-term relationships. They devised the filter theory to explain how romantic relationships form and develop. They explained that when selecting a partner, we have a 'field of availables', these are all the people we could realistically form a relationship with, however not everyone who is available is attractive or desirable to us.

They argue that there are three main factors that act as filters to narrow down our range of potential partner; social demography, similarity in attitudes and complementarity.

The first level of filter is social demography which can include geographical location, social class, level of education, ethnic background, religious beliefs and family values. Initially people may be more open to diversity in these factors, however when looking for a long-term partner they will select people who are more similar to themselves.

The second level of filter is similarity in attitudes, which is believed to be one of the most important factors when developing a romantic relationship. As individuals grow closer and are more willing to self-disclose, they reveal how similar they are in attitudes to each other. Byrne (1997) described consistent findings that suggests the similarity causes attraction, and if similarity does not exist the relationship, it is likely to fizzle out. Yet, Montoya et al (2008) conducted a meta-analysis and found that in real-world relationships, perceived similarity was a stronger predictor of attraction.

The third level of filter is complementarity, which concerns the ability of romantic partners to meet each other's needs. Their compatibility is dependent on how well they complement each other; does one partner have traits which add to the relationship? The theory argues that the need for complementarity was more important for long-term couples. However, some contrasting research claims that equality and similarity is more important for satisfaction in longer term romantic relationships (Markey and Markey, 2013).



Filter theory claims that demographic factors reduce the field of availables to a relatively small pool of people who are similar to us. However, the role of filters has changed over time; online dating and apps have increased the 'field of availables' so location no longer limits partner choice. In addition, social changes have led to relationships that were less common 30 - 40 years ago.

