

The Psychological Science of Relationships – News Brief

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(April 16, 2012) — Our relationships with others are an essential part of everyday life, but that doesn't mean that understanding and getting along with other people is easy. Here is some of the latest research on the mechanisms that drive our social interactions from the journal *Psychological Science*.

You Give Me the Chills: Embodied Reactions to Inappropriate Amounts of Behavioral Mimicry

Lead author: N. Pontus Leander – University of Groningen – n.p.leander@rug.nl – in press

There are some people who just give us 'the chills,' even though they seem perfectly polite and pleasant. New research examines whether these odd sensations might be the result of mimicry. Subtle mimicry is a nonverbal behavior that smooths our social interactions and help us to bond with other people. But not all mimicry is created equal. This study demonstrates that when another person mimics us too much, or not enough, we actually feel colder, suggesting that we rely on these 'chills' to help us size up the people we encounter.

Instrumentality Boosts Appreciation: Helpers Are More Appreciated While They Are Useful

Lead author: Benjamin Converse – University of Virginia – converse@virginia.edu – in press

We appreciate our friends because they help us out – after all, who but our friends would help us load a moving truck for just a few slices of pizza in return? But our feelings of appreciation often depend on the task at hand. In this study, the authors find that we feel the greatest appreciation for our helpers when we're in the middle of a task; when the task ends, our appreciation wanes. Interestingly, helpers don't see it the same way – they expect the same or an even greater level of appreciation when the task is over, leading to potential conflict between the helper and the person being helped.

Supportive Social Relationships Attenuate the Appeal of Choice

Lead author: Oscar Ybarra – University of Michigan – oybarra@umich.edu – in press

We like to have choices. But more options are not always better – when every aisle at the grocery store contains 20 or more different brands of the same product, even a simple shopping trip can result in decision fatigue. New research suggests that our relationships with others help us along as we go through the decision-making process. In this study, people who were primed to think of a supportive relationship opted for fewer choices when deciding which product to buy, a result that can be explained by the increased sense of security and calmness that is conveyed by reminders of social support.

Warm Thoughts: Attachment Anxiety and Sensitivity to Temperature Cues

Author: Matthew Vess – Ohio University – vessm@ohio.edu – published online April 5, 2012

From a ‘warm embrace’ to an ‘icy stare,’ it’s clear that temperature plays an important role in how we think about and experience social relationships. Previous research has shown that feeling warm can make us feel closer to others and feeling close to others can make us feel warmer. New research shows that people with high levels of attachment anxiety, which makes them particularly sensitive to cues related to social intimacy, are also more sensitive to temperature cues. The findings suggest that people with high levels of attachment anxiety may capitalize on the association between temperature and intimacy as a way of tempering their anxiety, seeking out warmth when they feel anxious or distressed.

Social Identification Structures Effects of Perspective Taking

Lead author: Mark Tarrant – University of Exeter – mark.tarrant@pcmd.ac.uk – in press

Could trying to empathize with an outsider backfire and make you like them less? New research suggests that asking people who identify very strongly with their group (for example, their university or their nation) to imagine a day in the life of a person from another group (a rival university or nation) may actually lead them to have more negative thoughts about that person. These findings suggest that social identity may play an important role in determining the effectiveness of perspective-taking exercises often used in conflict resolution.