

THE EFFICACY OF PLAYING HARD-TO-GET¹

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ABSTRACT

It has often been suggested that individuals will prefer dates who play "hard-to-get." Two experiments were conducted to test the hypothesis that teenagers will assume that a hard-to-get individual is more socially desirable than a person whose high regard is easily obtained. This hypothesis was not confirmed; the results were opposite to those predicted. It appears that playing hard-to-get is not an effective strategy for increasing one's status. Apparently, all the world does love a lover.

FIFTEEN YEARS ago, teachers were clear about their assignment; the formulation of behavioral objectives was restricted to the mastery of the three R's. Today, teachers express great concern about their students' social adjustment, peer relations, self-concepts, mental health, and moral and personality development. In fact, many educators argue that such adjustments are prerequisite for academic achievement. It is not uncommon to find that goals concerned with social and personality adjustment take priority to goals concerned with concept attainment in many experimental or innovative programs.

At the same time, there are very few guidelines provided for the teacher who wishes to contend with the emotional needs of his students. Neither teacher trainees' preparatory course-work nor the research literature provides such information. Thus, even the conscientious teacher is forced to rely entirely on his own intuition in these areas.

The following study investigates some of the factors which influence teenagers' perception of one another's social worth.

THE ELUSIVE PERSON

Socrates' advice to Theodota, a *hetaera*, on how to win friends and influence people was direct: play "hard-to-get":

. . . They will appreciate your favors most

highly if you wait till they ask for them. The sweetest meats, you see, if served before they are wanted seem sour, and to those who had enough they are positively nauseating; but even poor fare is very welcome when offered to a hungry man. (Theodota inquires) and how can I make them hunger for my fare? (Socrates' reply) Why, in the first place, you must not offer it to them when they have had enough—but prompt them by behaving as a model of propriety, be a show of reluctance to yield, and by holding back until they are as keen as can be; for then the same gifts are much more to the recipient than when they are offered before they are desired (8).

The notion that an individual can become desirable by playing hard-to-get is not only part of our folklore but part of the folklore of other times and countries. While Ovid, the *Kama Sutra*, and Dear Abby all agree that the lover should not display his affection too readily, no experimental evidence exists to document the effectiveness of the hard-to-get strategy.

There are some correlational data which indicate that those who appear to be greatly in need of affection are not held in high regard. Ehrlich (personal communication, 1969) found that mental patients who admitted possessing a strong need for approval were less popular among other patients and among the staff than were other patients. Ehrlich points out that her results agree with those reported by Crowne

and Marlowe (1) who found a negative correlation between the "approval dependence" of fraternity men and their popularity with other men. In these correlational studies it is not possible to determine if individuals have a strong need for approval because they have been rejected by others or if their desperate need for approval causes them to be rejected.

If being "hard-to-get" does in fact increase one's desirability, several theories might account for this phenomenon.

1. Dissonance Theory (3): The person who is hard-to-get requires a suitor to expend more effort in her pursuit than he would normally expend. One way the suitor can justify his unwarranted expenditure of energy is by aggrandizing the hard-to-get woman.
2. Learning Theory (6): By waiting until the suitor has achieved a high sexual drive state, heightening his arousal by introducing momentary frustration, and then finally rewarding him, the hard-to-get woman can maximize the impact of the rewards she provides.
3. Social Perception Theory: Individuals use information as to another's social standing on one trait as a clue to his standing on related characteristics. For example, individuals may have discovered that very socially desirable dates are harder-to-get than undesirable partners. The two concepts ("hard-to-get" and "socially desirable") might thus become associated. As a consequence, if a girl can successfully simulate being hard-to-get, she may be able to improve others' perception of her desirability.

The first two theoretical explanations of the hard-to-get phenomenon suggest that playing hard-to-get should alter only the suitor's perception of the hard-to-get romantic partner. Social Perception Theory suggests that the hard-to-get individual should impress an even wider constituency. Not only potential suitors, but uninvolved observers as well, should perceive the hard-to-get person as especially socially desirable.

The above rationale leads one to hypothesize that the more romantic interest a stimulus person expresses in a given romantic partner, the less socially desirable that stimulus person will be judged to be by an outside teen-age observer.

ALTERNATIVE HYPOTHESIS

An alternative, and somewhat more complicated, hypothesis also may be proposed. It could be argued that a stimulus person might gain or lose stature by expressing romantic interest in another, depending on how socially desirable the other is.

This hypothesis follows from research by Goffman (4), Kiesler and Baral (5), Dion and Berscheid (2), and Walster and Walster (7), demonstrating that individuals prefer romantic partners of approximately their own level of "social desirability."² If teen-agers assume that attractive people are most likely to express romantic interest in attractive others, while the unattractive will only admit to liking the unattractive, the teen-agers might use such

information in evaluating others. Thus, if an ostensibly attractive person expresses great romantic interest in an undesirable partner, the lover should lose stature as a consequence of his liking, while the beloved should gain stature. An ostensibly unattractive person who expresses romantic interest in an attractive partner should gain stature by his liking; the beloved should lose stature.

Thus, one may hypothesize that the attractiveness of a stimulus person, the attractiveness of his partner, and the extent of his romantic interest for the partner, should all be important determinants of how socially desirable the stimulus person and the partner appear to be to an outside observer.

The two experiments reported here were designed to investigate whether or not the knowledge that a person was hard-to-get affected a teen-ager's evaluation of that person. Experiment I varied the attractiveness of the stimulus person, the attractiveness of his partner, and the amount of romantic interest the stimulus person expressed for the partner. In Experiment I, the stimulus person and his partner were always of opposite sexes. Experiment II was similar to Experiment I in every detail, with the exception that the sexual similarity of the stimulus person and his partner was systematically varied.

METHOD—EXPERIMENT I

Subjects and Procedure

Subjects were 144 high school juniors and seniors who belonged to various youth groups in the Rochester, New York area. They were paid \$2.00 each for their participation.

To provide a rationale for asking the Ss to rate other students, the experimenter said she was investigating factors which may affect romantic attraction. She especially stressed at this and on several other occasions during the experiment that she was interested in romantic liking and not simply in "friendship." After this introduction, E handed out a detailed description of the project and read it aloud to the Ss:

We'd like you to help us in setting up a study we'll be running in the Fall.

We're interested in the kind of first impression that various teen-agers make on others. We've obtained pictures and some background information about several graduating seniors. We got this information in the following way: We introduced two students who didn't know each other, and had them meet together four times. Then, they filled out a confidential report about their impressions of, and their feelings about each other. As would be expected, some couples really liked each other and others really disliked each other. Also, there were couples in which one person liked the other, but was not liked in return.

Today we'd like to try out some of the materials we plan to use in the Fall. I'll show you pictures of two students, and give you whatever information we have about them, including how they reacted to one another. In some cases we

don't have all the information we'd like as yet, so you'll just have to bear with us.

There are three things we would like you to do. First, go through the booklet and read all the information about both students. Don't answer any questions right away. Instead, think about both of them for a few minutes. Try to imagine what they're both like, how they'd act with one another, and so forth. Then, give us your honest impressions of them. Don't tell us what you think you should think, or what other people would think. Just tell us what you think. Don't hesitate to use the extremes in rating if they seem applicable.

After you've answered a question, you can comment on the question itself, if you wish. If you feel it is unclear, or should be put another way, then make a note on your sheet suggesting how it might be improved.

Subjects were then given a booklet containing the picture and biography of one male and one female student. Half of the time the stimulus person depicted in each photograph was physically attractive, the remainder of the time he was ugly. Beneath each picture was a paragraph describing the school activities of the person depicted. If the person was attractive, the background information implied that he was a very socially desirable individual.³ For example, the attractive boy's biography said:

Bill is 17 and graduated this June from a New York high school. During the past year he was an active participant in extra-curricular activities at his school. He was a class officer, a member of the football team, one of the editors of the school yearbook, and a member of the band. His hobbies include sports at which he has unusual natural abilities. Bill is also an officer in one of his community's youth groups. He plans to study medicine for his future career.

If the stimulus person depicted in the photograph was physically unattractive, the background information indicated that he was not socially desirable. For example, the ugly boy's biography said:

Jack is 17 and graduated this June from a New York high school. During the past year, he was not an active participant in extra-curricular activities at his school, but he did help to sell school yearbooks and was a member of the band. Outside of school he does some swimming and team sports, although he does not have too much skill at them. Occasionally Jack attends meetings of one of his community's youth groups.

Finally, Ss were told how romantically interested the first stimulus person was in the partner after they had met with each other four times. The stimulus person was said to have liked the other extremely much, not particularly much, or no liking information was provided. If the stimulus person was "extremely romantically interested" in his partner, the following paragraph was added to his biography:

At the conclusion of their four meetings together, Bill was asked to tell us honestly how much liking he felt for Nancy, and how much time he

would be interested in spending with her in the future. He said (1) he liked her extremely much, and (2) that he would enjoy spending a great deal of time with her in the future.

If he was not to be particularly interested in his partner, the last sentence read:

He said (1) he did not particularly like her, and (2) that he would not want to spend time with her in the future.

If the stimulus person's liking for his partner was to be unknown, the sentence read:

We do not have information about whether he likes or dislikes Nancy.

Subjects were never told how much the partner liked the stimulus person.

The variations just described yielded a 2x2x3 design: Attractiveness of the stimulus person, by Attractiveness of the partner by The stimulus person's romantic interest in the partner. Half the Ss assigned to each cell were male and half were female.

Dependent Variables

After considering the photographs and biographies of the stimulus person and his partner for sometime, and imagining what it would be like to associate with both teen-agers, Ss were asked to complete a questionnaire composed of the following ten questions: (1) How popular would stimulus person (SP) be with the girls at your school? (2) How popular would SP be with the boys? (3) How much do you think you would like SP? (4) How likely is it that SP is the kind of person you would want to spend much time with? (5) How physically attractive do you think SP is? (6) How much would you guess the partner (P) likes SP? (7) How likely is it that SP is the kind of person who would want to spend much time with you? (8) How physically attractive do you think P is? (9) How popular would you guess P would be with the students at your school? (10) What clues did you use in making these judgments about each member of the pictured couple? How confident do you feel about your judgments?

Scores on questions 1-6 were summed to form an Index of the stimulus person's Social Desirability. Questions 8 and 9 were summed to form an Index of the partner's Social Desirability. (The lower the score on each index, the more socially desirable the stimulus person was judged to be.)

EXPERIMENT II

Subjects and Procedure

Subjects were 128 high school students from the Rochester area.

As previously mentioned, the experimental design of Experiment I was duplicated in Experiment II with the exception that the sexual similarity of the stimulus person and his partner was systematically varied. This necessitated a modification in the experimental procedure. Although E used the same rationale in Experiment II as in Experiment I, she could no longer plausibly claim to be interested in the factors that affect romantic attraction. It was reasoned, however, the Ss would assume that oppo-

TABLE I

EXPERIMENT I: THE EFFECT OF A STIMULUS PERSON'S ROMANTIC LIKING FOR HIS PARTNER AND THE ATTRACTIVENESS OF THE PARTNER, IN DETERMINING Ss' EVALUATIONS

Stimulus Person's Romantic Liking for Partner	Stimulus Person's Attractiveness	Partner's Attractiveness	Perceived Social Desirability of Stimuli ^b	
			Stimulus Person	Partner
Great Interest	Desirable ^a	Desirable	14.50	3.58
	Desirable	Undesirable	14.17	7.33
	Undesirable	Desirable	18.67	3.08
	Undesirable	Undesirable	17.75	7.08
			$\bar{M}=16.27$	$\bar{M}=5.27$
Unknown	Desirable	Desirable	15.83	3.25
	Desirable	Undesirable	15.17	7.58
	Undesirable	Desirable	20.25	3.83
	Undesirable	Undesirable	18.25	7.25
			$\bar{M}=17.38$	$\bar{M}=5.48$
Great Disinterest	Desirable	Desirable	16.00	3.75
	Desirable	Undesirable	13.67	7.67
	Undesirable	Desirable	21.00	3.92
	Undesirable	Undesirable	19.33	7.17
			$\bar{M}=17.50$	$\bar{M}=5.63$

a. N=12 per cell

b. The lower the number, the more desirable the stimuli

site sex relationships were potentially romantic relationships, while same sex relationships were not.

In this experiment, the stimulus person was either said to like his partner extremely much or be disinterested in further interaction with his partner. The condition in which Ss were given no information regarding the stimulus person's reaction to his partner was not included.

The same pictures and biographies described in Experiment I were used in Experiment II, and the stimulus pictures once again varied in attractiveness. Half the time the stimuli were extremely attractive, half of the time extremely unattractive. Appropriate background information was once again provided, and Ss were asked to answer the same questionnaire administered in Experiment I.

The experimental variations in Experiment II, then, yielded a 2x2x2 design: Sexual similarity of SP and P by Attractiveness of SP by Attractiveness of P by SP's Romantic Interest in P.

RESULTS

Manipulation Check

The social desirability of the stimuli were successfully manipulated. In both experiments, the attractive stimulus person was judged to be more socially desirable than the unattractive person (in Experiment I, $F=63.22$, in Experiment II, $F=25.56$).

The attractive partner was also judged to be more socially desirable than was the unattractive partner (in Experiment I, $F=190.68$, in Experiment II, $F=195.05$).

Experimental Results

With respect to our hypothesis (that the more romantic interest a person expresses in another, the less socially desirable that person will appear to an outside observer), the data were clear. The results are diametrically opposed to those predicted. From Tables 1 and 2 it is evident that the more interested the stimulus person admits he is in the partner he met a short time before, the more socially desirable teen-agers assume the stimulus person must be. In Experiment I, this linear trend was not quite significant ($F=3.4, 5; p=.07$). In Experiment II, however, similar results were secured and this main effect was statistically significant ($F=8.11$). The more the stimulus person liked his partner, the more socially desirable teen-agers perceived the stimulus person to be.

The stimulus person's Social Desirability Index was constructed by summing Ss' answers to six questions. Let us examine each of the six questions.

In Experiment I we find that when the stimulus person is romantically interested in his partner he is evaluated more highly on all six questions than when he is disinterested in his partner. On only one question, however, does the difference reach statistical significance. (The more romantic interest SP expressed in P, the more Ss assumed that the stimulus person reciprocated his liking $F=8.70$.) In Experiment II, the stimulus person who liked his partner was again rated higher on all six items making up the Social Desirability Index. On only three of these items, however, were there statistically significant main effects. The more the stimulus person liked his partner the more Ss liked the stimulus person

TABLE 2

EXPERIMENT II: THE EFFECT OF THE STIMULUS PERSON'S LIKING FOR HIS PARTNER ON Ss' EVALUATIONS

Stimulus Person's Liking for His Partner	Sex of the Stimulus Person and His Partner	Perceived Social Desirability of Stimuli ^b	
		Stimulus Person	His Partner
Great Liking ^a	Same Sex	17.07	5.72
Great Liking	Opposite Sex	18.04	6.41
Great Disinterest	Same Sex	19.16	6.44
Great Disinterest	Opposite Sex	19.41	6.57

a. N=32 per cell

b. The lower the number, the more desirable the stimuli.

($F = 9.82$), the more time Ss wanted to spend with him ($F = 6.10$), and the more Ss assumed the partner must have liked him ($F = 25.43$).

Alternative Hypothesis

With respect to the alternative hypothesis (that whether or not a person gains or loses stature by expressing romantic interest in another depends on the social desirability of the object of his affection) the data are again clear. There is no support for the notion that the attractiveness of the stimulus person, the attractiveness of his partner, and the degree of liking SP expresses for P will interact in determining how socially desirable the stimuli are judged to be. The alternative hypothesis predicted that unattractive stimuli would gain stature if they liked or were liked by attractive individuals, and attractive individuals would lose stature if they liked or were liked by ugly individuals. These predicted 3-way interactions were all nonsignificant. First, consider Ss' ratings of the stimulus person's social desirability: In Experiment I, the predicted 3-way interaction equalled .47; in Experiment II, $F = .00$. When we consider the Ss' ratings of the partner, the results are the same: In Experiment I, the predicted 3-way interaction equalled .22; in Experiment II, $F = .14$.

The complete rejection of this hypothesis is somewhat surprising. Had the hypothesis been supported, the results would have been consistent with the findings of Kiesler and Baral (5), Dion and Berscheid (2), and Walster and Walster (7). In addition, the results would have been consistent with the common sense observation that individuals assume that they lose stature by liking or being liked by the "wrong" individuals. In informal interviews conducted with several of the high school girls, many confessed that it is extremely embarrassing to be asked out, in public, by socially undesirable boys. Part of the embarrassment probably arises from the fact that when an unacceptable person asks one out, one is faced with the problem of publicly rejecting the undesirable suitor in a tactful way. However, the reason most commonly cited by the teen-agers for being embarrassed when asked out by a "creep," was that "my friends might think that I'd actually go out with some-

one like that!" The girls assumed they would lose status if they liked or were liked by others less desirable than themselves. The data collected in the present two experiments suggest that their fears may be groundless.

In sum, the present data indicate that people simply like people who like people. There is no evidence for the hypothesized effectiveness of a hard-to-get strategy. Both hard-to-get hypotheses failed to receive even a suggestion of support.

FOOTNOTES

1. This research was financed in part by National Institute of Mental Health Grants 16661 and 16729 and in part by the Office of the Dean of Students, University of Minnesota. We would like to thank Elaine Rosenwasser for running this experiment.
2. "Social Desirability" was defined by Walster and Walster (7) as "The sum of an individual's social assets, weighted by importance and salience for others." Social assets such as physical attractiveness, popularity, personableness, and material resources were presumed to be important factors in determining one's social desirability level.
3. An experiment was run with Rochester high school seniors to insure that the photographs and biographies of the "socially desirable" stimuli were perceived as more desirable than were the photographs and biographies of the less desirable stimuli.
4. In Experiment I, $df = 1$ and 96. In Experiment II, $df = 1$ and 112.

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