Assortative mating for perceived facial personality traits

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Abstract

The widespread belief that partners look alike has received some empirical support. Here we examine some perceptual characteristics of faces that may account for this similarity. Across two studies judges rated perceived age, attractiveness, and five personality traits of married individuals' faces. Correlations showed that perceived age, attractiveness and some personality traits were similar between partners and that matching for perceived personality occurred even when controlling for age and attractiveness of the faces. This finding may reflect individuals choosing partners who physically resemble themselves or partners who appear to have similar personalities to themselves. Analysis also showed that couples that had been together longer looked more similar in perceived personality traits, which may reflect couples growing more similar in apparent personality over time or that those appearing alike in personality stay together longer.
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1. Introduction

It is a widespread belief that partners look alike. Mating with similar individuals at levels above chance is called positive assortative mating (e.g., Thiessen & Gregg, 1980) and in many animal species is the most widely reported mating pattern (Burley, 1983).

Early research on human assortative mating focused on correlations in the measurements of anthropometric characteristics between partners such as arm length and handbreadth. For example, Spuhler (1968) took 43 physical measurements from 205 married couples and found significant positive correlations on 29 of these measurements including 7 of 15 facial or cranial measurements. No negative correlations were reported. Reviews of early studies on partner similarity, from research spanning nearly seventy years, reveal an overall pattern of low positive correlations (0.01–0.35) for many physical features (Roberts, 1977; Spuhler, 1968). More recent studies controlling factors such as age (Malina, Selby, Buschang, Aronson, & Little, 1983) and cohabitation (Allison et al., 1996) also demonstrate positive correlations for certain characteristics and together these studies demonstrate that positive assortative mating for physical characteristics does occur in human marriages (though see Lykken & Tellegen, 1993).

Three studies have examined whether married couples have similar facial characteristics. Griffiths and Kunz (1973) took photos of married couples and asked participants to match up the photos of real partners from a small set of faces. Couples married for less than 10 years and for over 20 years were matched at levels above chance but subjects failed to match couples married for between ten and twenty years.

Zajonc, Adelmann, Murphy, and Niendenthal (1987) performed a similar experiment, hypothesising that couples do not pair due to similarity, but become more physically alike over time due to sharing similar diets, lifestyles and emotional experiences. For 12 married couples, participants were given one photo from the first year and one photo from the 25th year of the marriage. Although judges were unable to match partners better than chance in the first year of marriage, photos from the 25th year of marriage were ranked as more similar than would be expected by chance.

Hinsz (1989) also studied facial similarity in real couples using photographs of engaged couples and couples married for around 25 years. Participants were presented with opposite-sex pairs of photos, and asked to rate the similarity between the two faces. Half of the pairs presented were actual couples, and half were randomly generated couples. Real couples were rated as significantly more similar than randomly generated couples. Unlike Zajonc et al. (1987), couples that had been together for longer periods of time were not perceived as more similar than new couples. Thus studies of facial similarity indicate that couples are perceived to be more facially similar to one another than expected by chance, though the relationship between partnership length and facial similarity is unclear.

One facial characteristic that has received a lot of attention in research on assortative mating is attractiveness. In the early 1970s researchers found that couples in relationships were similar in physical attractiveness (e.g., Murstein, 1971; Silverman, 1971). Feingold (1988) conducted a meta-analysis showing a high mean inter-partner correlation for physical attractiveness for romantic couples ($r = 0.49$). It is possible therefore that some perceived facial similarity between couples is based on similar levels of attractiveness.

Partners have been found to mate assortatively for some actual personality traits. Botwin, Buss, and Shackelford (1997) found positive correlations between partners for three of the Big Five

(McCrae & Costa, 1987) factors of personality: agreeableness ($r = 0.33$), conscientiousness ($r = 0.22$) and openness to experience ($r = 0.38$). No significant correlations were found for extraversion ($r = -0.10$) or neuroticism ($r = 0.06$). Botwin et al. (1997) also found that individuals preferred partners who had similar personality characteristics to themselves (positive correlations between own and desired personality for all 5-factors).

Preferences for similar personalities may be reflected in face preferences. That personality is inferred from faces is well documented (e.g., Hassin & Trope, 2000). While personality attributions are not necessarily valid, the desire for a partner with a similar personality may affect attraction to faces. For example, if you desire a conscientious partner you may be attracted to people with conscientious looking faces as such people may actually be more conscientiousness. Choosing a partner on the basis of similar personality could lead to facial similarity in partners in terms of apparent personality (e.g., partners select each other for perceived extraversion and so both have extravert looking faces).

Alternatively, as Zajonc et al. hypothesised, couples could grow to look more alike due to shared experience. There is evidence that the personality dispositions of elderly people are reflected in their faces, those of a hostile disposition tend to look angry even when posing in a neutral expression (Malatesta, Fiore, & Messina, 1987). Thus we might also expect greater similarity in perceived personality between older partners.

2. Rationale for present studies

The current study examined perceived physical and personality characteristics in the faces of married couples across two studies to address whether couples assortatively mate for perceived personality traits. As humans do not assort on all dimensions for real personality (e.g., Botwin et al., 1997) it was not expected that all perceived traits would match between partners. Correlations in perceived traits between partners were calculated to address assortment and whether assortment varies with relationship length. Given that previous work has linked beauty to positive personality attributions (Dion, Berscheid, & Walster, 1972) and that age-related cues, such as infant-like characteristics, influence personality judgements (Berry & McArthur, 1986), we controlled for perceived attractiveness and age in assessments of assortment for perceived personality. The current study thus represents the most controlled study of assortative mating for facial traits to date and the first to address which specific traits, including perceived personality, account for partner similarity.

3. Study 1

3.1. Methods

3.1.1. Participants

Eleven male (aged 21–54, mean 25.2 years) and 11 female (aged 21–31, mean 23.2 years) participants rated faces for their perceived characteristics.

3.1.2. Stimuli

One hundred and seventy individual photographs were shown representing 85 married couples. Photographs were requested in a national newspaper in Britain. Readers were asked to provide passport/passport style photos of each individual in the couple. Photographs were digitised and cropped to show only the head if more than the head was visible in the original image. The 85 couples filled in a questionnaire asking age, height, weight and length of marriage. Partnership length ranged from 2 to 51 years (mean 19.9, SD 11.8). The actual age of partners ranged from 24 to 75 (mean 47.0, SD 12.1) for women and from 25 to 83 (mean 50.3, SD 13.3) for men.

3.1.3. Procedure

The 85 male faces and the 85 female faces were presented to the 22 raters in two blocks each containing either all male or all female faces. Faces were presented on a computer screen in random order, each alongside with eight 7-point bipolar rating scales Participants were able to select scores by using a computer mouse to click on one of seven numbers. Participants rated each face for three facial characteristics (unattractive–attractive, masculine–feminine and distinctive–average) and five personality characteristics representing the Big Five personality factors (e.g., McCrae & Costa, 1987). The five bipolar descriptors are given below together with their personality factors in brackets: broad interests–narrow interests (openness to experience), insecure–secure (neuroticism), quiet–loud (extraversion), ruthless–soft-hearted (agreeableness), and self-disciplined–weak-willed (conscientiousness). Participants selected a box for the approximate age of the face (broken down into two-and-a-half year increments—boxes were presented to participants from 15 up to 100 years old).

3.2. Results

All correlations are computed using Pearson's product moment coefficient and statistics are reported 2-tailed.

3.2.1. Reliability of ratings

Using Cronbach's α, very high inter-rater agreement was found for all types of ratings across both male (quiet $\alpha = 0.82$, insecure $\alpha = 0.73$, ruthless $\alpha = 0.86$, self-discipline $\alpha = 0.75$, broad interests $\alpha = 0.76$, attractiveness $\alpha = 0.91$, masculinity $\alpha = 0.85$, distinctiveness $\alpha = 0.76$ and age $\alpha = 0.99$) and female faces (quiet $\alpha = 0.77$, insecure $\alpha = 0.72$, ruthless $\alpha = 0.80$, self-discipline $\alpha = 0.77$, broad interests $\alpha = 0.74$, attractiveness $\alpha = 0.95$, masculinity $\alpha = 0.95$, distinctiveness $\alpha = 0.77$ and age $\alpha = 0.99$).

3.2.2. Matching for characteristics between partners

3.2.2.1. Self-reported physical characteristics.
Two of the males did not report own weight and so statistics on weight have a sample of 83 couples. Significant correlations were found between partners for height ($r_{85} = 0.33$, $p = 0.002$) and weight ($r_{83} = 0.22$, $p = 0.04$). Body mass index (BMI, weight/height^2) was positively but not significantly correlated between partners ($r_{83} = 0.11$, $p = 0.31$). No other inter-correlations reached significance. Significant correlations remained positive when controlling for partnership length (height: $r_{76} = 0.36$, $p = 0.002$; weight: $r_{76} = 0.22$, $p = 0.068$), though only height remained significant.

3.2.2.2. Perceived personality characteristics. Significant correlations were found between partners for perceived broad interests ($r_{85} = 0.28$, $p = 0.01$), insecurity ($r_{85} = 0.28$, $p = 0.01$) and self-discipline ($r_{85} = 0.25$, $p = 0.02$). The correlations between partners for quietness ($r_{85} = 0.10$, $p = 0.37$) and ruthlessness ($r = 0.06$, $p = 0.61$) were both positive but neither significant. The inter-correlations for all perceived personality traits are presented in Table 1.

There were two relationships between partners in personality across different traits. A positive relationship was found between perceived male quietness and perceived female ruthlessness ($r_{85} = 0.24$, $p = 0.03$) and a negative correlation between male perceived self-discipline and female perceived insecurity ($r_{85} = -0.22$, $p = 0.04$).

Personality attributions may change with stimuli age and attractiveness and so matching for age or attractiveness could result in matching for perceived personality. To address this issue, partial correlations between personality traits were computed controlling for both male and female perceived age and attractiveness. When controlling for age and attractiveness the correlation between partners for broad interests ($r_{79} = 0.24$, $p = 0.033$) remained significant. The relationships for insecurity ($r_{79} = 0.05$, $p = 0.63$), quietness ($r_{79} = 0.04$, $p = 0.75$), self-discipline ($r_{79} = 0.07$, $p = 0.51$), and male self-discipline and female insecurity ($r_{79} = -0.03$, $p = 0.73$) were positive but not significant. The relationship between apparent quietness in males and ruthlessness in females approached significance ($r_{79} = 0.20$, $p = 0.076$).

3.2.2.3. Perceived physical facial characteristics. A significant relationship was found between partners' perceived ages ($r_{85} = 0.78$, $p < 0.001$). Significant positive correlations were also found between partners for perceived attractiveness ($r_{85} = 0.43$, $p < 0.001$) and masculinity ($r_{85} = 0.25$, $p = 0.02$). The correlation between partners for distinctiveness was not significant ($r_{85} = 0.14$, $p = 0.21$, Table 2). Inter-correlations for these traits can be seen in Table 2.

Again, because the perception of physical characteristics is linked to age, matching for age may account for matching in other characteristics. When controlling for age, the relationship for attractiveness remained significant ($r_{81} = 0.29$, $p = 0.007$) and, although positive, the correlations for distinctiveness ($r_{81} = 0.11$, $p = 0.30$) and masculinity ($r_{81} = 0.18$, $p = 0.10$) were not significant.

Table 1
Correlations between partners for ratings of perceived personality for Study 1

Male	Female				
	Broad interests	Insecure	Quiet	Ruthless	Self-disciplined
Broad interests	**0.28**[**]	−0.07	0.02	−0.13	0.10
Insecure	−0.09	**0.28**[**]	0.06	0.07	−0.13
Quiet	−0.12	0.05	**0.10**	0.24[*]	0.19
Ruthless	−0.17	−0.01	−0.05	**0.06**	−0.07
Self-disciplined	−0.05	−0.22[*]	0.06	0.04	**0.25**[*]

[*] $p < 0.05$.
[**] $p < 0.01$.

Table 2
Correlations between partners for perceived facial physical characteristics

Male	Female		
	Attractiveness	Distinctiveness	Masculinity
Attractiveness	**0.43**[**]	−0.02	−0.32[**]
Distinctiveness	−0.25[*]	**0.14**	0.23[*]
Masculinity	−0.24[*]	−0.17	**0.25**[*]

[*] $p < 0.05$.
[**] $p < 0.01$.

Table 3
Correlations between partnership length and perceived absolute differences in individual physical and personality characteristics (controlling for male and female age and attractiveness)

Absolute differences	Correlation with partnership length
Distinctiveness	0.14
Masculinity	−0.07
Broad interests	−0.24[*]
Insecure	−0.20
Quiet	−0.05
Ruthless	−0.09
Self-disciplined	−0.27[*]
Height	0.11
Weight	−0.10
BMI	−0.07

[*] $p < 0.05$.

3.2.3. Similarity and partnership length

Zajonc et al. (1987) argued that partners grow to look more similar over time due to shared experience. While other explanations are not excluded, Zajonc et al.'s hypothesis predicts that as partnership length increases perceived differences between partners should decrease.

To assess this relationship the absolute (unsigned) differences between male and female scores for each trait were computed. The mean differences for perceived physical facial traits and personality traits were calculated for each partnership (i.e. for each couple a single value was calculated using absolute mean differences, (attractiveness + masculinity + distinctiveness)/3 and (broad interests + insecure + quiet + ruthless + self-disciplined)/5). These unsigned difference scores were then correlated with partnership length, controlling for male and female age and attractiveness.

A significant negative correlation was found between partnership length and difference in overall perceived personality characteristics ($r_{75} = -0.27$, $p = 0.016$).[1] No significant relationship was found between partnership length and perceived differences in physical characteristics ($r_{75} = 0.03$, $p = 0.77$). Table 3 shows the relationship between individual characteristic differences between partners over partnership length.

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[1] Note that this *r* value is not equivalent to simply averaging the *r* values in Table 3.

4. Study 2

4.1. Rationale

Study 1 demonstrated that partners look alike for certain personality traits though the evidence is weak. The large age range of the images in Study 1 makes it sensitive in examining how similarity varies over relationship length but the large age differences between the faces may mean age-related stereotypes have a large impact on the judges, masking assortment. Also, if partners are more similar the longer they have been together, and age correlates with partnership length, then controlling for age will reduce the correlation between partners.

In Study 2 we collected a sample of photographs in a narrower age range as it is likely that presenting faces with less variation in age should make judges more sensitive to cues to personality other than age. Thus Study 2 should be more sensitive in examining correlations between partners than Study 1 but be less sensitive in examining changes in partner similarity over time due to the narrower age range. The question scales were also changed to more directly assess the five factor model of personality.

4.2. Participants

Nine male and 10 female participants rated faces for their perceived characteristics. Age was not recorded from the participants of Study 2 though all raters were of young adult appearance.

4.3. Stimuli

One hundred and thirty individual photographs were shown representing 65 married couples. The photographs were provided by the individuals themselves. Participants were asked to provide a recent passport/passport style photograph which was requested by letter from the parents of students at the University of St Andrews. Again, these photographs were digitised and cropped to show only the head.

4.4. Procedure

The 65 male faces and the 65 female faces were presented to the 19 raters in two blocks each containing one sex of face. Faces were presented on a computer screen in a random order with five questions presented along side in the same way as Study 1. Participants rated each face for attractiveness and the Big Five personality factors: openness to experience, neuroticism, extraversion, agreeableness and conscientiousness (questions are different to Study 1 though the underlying concepts are equivalent). Attractiveness and perceived age were assessed separately for each face being rated. Attractiveness was assessed on a 7-point Likert scale and age was assessed by allowing participants to click on a box for relative age, one axis for decade (20s, 30s, 40s, up to 90s) and one for position within that decade (early, mid, late). Order of rating (attractiveness and age, and personality) was random.

4.5. Results

4.5.1. Reliability of ratings

Using Cronbach's α, very high inter-rater agreement was found for all types of ratings across both male (extraversion α = 0.93, neuroticism α = 0.78, agreeableness α = 0.89, conscientiousness α = 0.82, openness α = 0.82, attractiveness α = 0.89 and age α = 0.93) and female faces (extraversion α = 0.93, neuroticism α = 0.82, agreeableness α = 0.90, conscientiousness α = 0.72, openness α = 0.86, attractiveness α = 0.91 and age α = 0.95).

4.5.2. Perceived personality between partners

A significant relationship was found between partners for perceived extraversion ($r_{65} = 0.25$, $p = 0.049$) and conscientiousness ($r_{65} = 0.33$, $p = 0.007$). No significant relationship between partners was found for perceived openness ($r_{65} = 0.19$, $p = 0.12$), agreeableness ($r_{65} = 0.08$, $p = 0.51$) or neuroticism ($r_{65} = 0.13$, $p = 0.32$). Table 4 shows these relationships.

Partial correlations controlling for male and female perceived age and male and female attractiveness were also carried out. The relationship between partners for perceived extraversion ($r_{65} = 0.35$, $p = 0.006$) and conscientiousness ($r_{65} = 0.25$, $p = 0.05$) remained significant. The relationship for perceived openness also became significant ($r_{65} = 0.28$, $p = 0.030$) in this analysis. No significant relationship was found for perceived agreeableness ($r_{65} = 0.13$, $p = 0.32$) or neuroticism ($r_{65} = 0.12$, $p = 0.38$) but both correlations were positive.

4.5.3. Perceived age and attractiveness between partners

Significant positive correlations were found between partners for perceived attractiveness ($r_{65} = 0.50$, $p < 0.001$) and age ($r_{65} = 0.61$, $p < 0.001$). When controlling for perceived age the relationship for attractiveness between partners remained ($r_{65} = 0.47$, $p < 0.001$).

4.5.4. Similarity in perceived personality and age

Partnership length and actual age were not assessed in Study 2 and so we used average perceived age as an estimate of partnership length. This appears a reasonable approximation as in Study 1 average perceived age and partnership length were strongly related ($r_{85} = 0.73$, $p < 0.001$).

As in Study 1, absolute differences between partners was calculated and correlated with average perceived age (controlling for male and female attractiveness). A negative correlation was found

Table 4
Correlations between partners for ratings of perceived personality for Study 2

Male	Female				
	Extraversion	Neuroticism	Agreeableness	Conscientiousness	Openness
Extraversion	**0.25**[*]	−0.17	0.09	−0.09	0.16
Neuroticism	−0.16	**0.13**	−0.10	−0.03	−0.13
Agreeableness	0.15	−0.13	**0.08**	−0.01	0.16
Conscientiousness	0.16	−0.16	0.16	**0.33**[*]	0.12
Openness	0.17	−0.15	0.13	0.11	**0.19**

[*] $p < 0.05$.

between partnership length and difference in overall perceived personality characteristics (mean of personality differences for all five traits, $r_{61} = -0.21$, $p = 0.10$).[2]

Average perceived age was not related to the absolute difference between partners for Extraversion ($r = -0.11$, $p = 0.39$), Agreeableness ($r = -0.08$, $p = 0.52$), or Openness ($r = -0.10$, $p = 0.43$). Average perceived age was correlated negatively to the difference between partners for Neuroticism ($r = -0.30$, $p = 0.018$) and the relationship for Conscientiousness ($r = -0.24$, $p = 0.059$) was approaching significance. All relationships were negative.

5. Discussion

Assortative mating appears to occur over a wide range of characteristics in humans, with partnerships forming between individuals who are similar at levels above chance. The current study investigated the basis of facial similarity between partners (Griffiths & Kunz, 1973; Hinsz, 1989; Zajonc et al., 1987), demonstrating that married couples are perceived to possess several similar facial characteristics, including age, attractiveness and perceived broad interests (Study 1 and 2), conscientiousness and extraversion (Study 2). Similarity in these perceived personality traits remained when controlling for age and attractiveness. Matching for any or all of these characteristics may account for the perceived facial similarity between partners reported in several studies. Positive assortative mating for perceived personality is supported by the fact that all of the correlations between the same personality traits in partners were positive (10 out of 10 across Studies 1 and 2). In fact, no negative assortment was seen for any perceived trait between partners in either study. An association *across* traits was found between male quietness and female ruthlessness in Study 1. The ability of observers to match couples need therefore not solely rely on similarity between partners; couples may be correctly matched because of the perception of compatible or complementary characteristics. Our study then is the first to advance assortative mating for similarity to specific traits rather than global similarity and at the same time to control for other important perceived traits.

5.1. Age and attractiveness

The strongest correlations between partners in both studies were found for age, replicating previous findings (e.g., Botwin et al., 1997). Also in agreement with previous studies (e.g., Feingold, 1988), significant matching for attractiveness was found between partners in both Study 1 and 2, and this remained when controlling for age of both partners.

Given associations between age, attractiveness and personality attributions, previous studies not controlling for age are inconclusive in their assessment of similarity between partners. Matching for age can account for assortative mating for other physical and apparent personality characteristics because these traits co-vary with age. For example, if 40-year-old males and females are

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[2] This correlation would be significant 1-tailed, as predicted by the results of Study 1.

less attractive than 20-year-old males and females, assortative mating for age would mean assortative mating for attractiveness.

5.2. Height and weight

Previous findings have shown that partners match up for height and weight (e.g., Feingold, 1988; Malina et al., 1983) though not all studies (e.g., Botwin et al., 1997). The current study therefore adds support to the notion of assortative mating for overall physical characteristics, demonstrating partners match up for height and weight, though not BMI. Partners were not found to be more similar in weight with increasing partnership length and so we found no effects of shared environment and diet on this variable.

5.3. Perceived personality

Matching was found for several perceived personality traits. In Study 1 only the correlation for perceived broad interests remained significant between partners when controlling for age and attractiveness. The large age range here may influence the range of personality attributions elicited, focusing raters on age cues, something that would not be apparent in narrower age range. Indeed in Study 2 we found three significantly positive correlations in the five personality traits, when controlling for age and attractiveness in partners with a more restricted age range. Thus, Study 2 was more powerful in examining, and revealed stronger ties between, the perceived personalities of couples than Study 1. It is also possible that the different questions used in Study 2 may account for some of the variation between the two studies.

The notion of complementarity has arisen in some discussions of assortative mating and in Study 1 we found that quiet looking males had ruthless looking partners. This relationship exists between different personality traits and so does not strictly reflect the maxim ''opposites attract'', but may reflect matching for perceived compatible or complementary personality traits.

5.4. Partnership length

Study 1 showed no significant tendency for people married longer to have more similar physical characteristics (height, weight) or look more similar for perceived attractiveness, masculinity or distinctiveness. There was, however, a significant tendency for partners to appear more similar in personality traits the longer they had been married. Study 2 supports the findings of Study 1, although only trending towards significance. Inconsistencies between Study 1 and Study 2 may reflect the narrower age range and use of average perceived age as a measure of partnership length in Study 2. There are two plausible mechanisms to account for increased partnership similarity over time. People may grow more alike in perceived personality the longer they are together, as suggested by Zajonc et al. (1987), possibly because shared expressions become visible in the face. Alternatively, people who look more similar in personality traits may have a tendency to stay married longer. Choosing a partner similar to you may increase marital stability. For example, Hill, Rubin, and Peplau (1976) found that couples that were similar on a variety of physical and psychological traits were more likely to remain together than were dissimilar partners.

5.5. Assortative mating for perceived personality

An assortative pattern is not necessarily caused by assortative preferences (Burley, 1983). In a population where a certain characteristic (personality or physical trait) is universally considered attractive, an assortative pattern can still develop (Kalick & Hamilton, 1986). For example, if height is an attractive trait in a partner, then tall people are able to attract tall partners, leaving progressively shorter people to pair up with the remaining short people in the population. In the context of this study, if extravert-looking partners are more valued than people who look introverted, then highly extravert looking people will pair up leaving progressively more introvert looking people to pair up.

Despite an assortative pattern not necessarily being due to assortative preferences, there is some evidence that assortative mating for actual personality may be linked to desires for self-similar partners. Botwin et al. (1997) found that individuals want partners who are similar to themselves on personality characteristics. People also seem to get what they want in terms of partner personality; modest positive correlations were found between what personality traits people indicated they desired in a partner and what personality traits their current partner possessed (Botwin et al., 1997). It is possible that a desire for a partner with a similar personality could result in assortative mating for perceived personality traits, especially given that some perceptual attributions to still facial photographs have limited accuracy and may reflect actual personality traits (e.g., Borkenau & Liebler, 1992; Penton-Voak, Pound, Little, & Perrett, in press). Even without accuracy, people's general belief that faces do provide important guides to character (Liggett, 1974; Hassin & Trope, 2000) may lead them to make partner choices based on facial appearances that appear to be in line with their desired or own personality traits. Shared experience may then also increase similarity in perceived personality (Zajonc et al., 1987).

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