

Markey, P. M., & Markey, C. N. (2009). Complementarity. In H. Reis & S. Sprecher (Eds.), *Encyclopedia of Human Relationships*, Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

Complementarity

Within the context of social relationships, the term complementarity has two distinct and separate meanings. Of these two definitions, complementarity most commonly refers to the premise that people tend to seek out other individuals with characteristics that are different yet complementary from their own (a concept sometimes called negative assortative mating). A second definition of complementarity is derived from Interpersonal Theory and refers to the principle that during any dyadic interaction, the behaviors of one person tend to elicit or constrain the behaviors of the other, and vice versa (a concept sometimes called interpersonal complementarity). This entry describes both of these definitions and provides an overview of the research examining complementarity.

Negative Assortative Mating

The notion that people are generally attracted to persons who possess characteristics that are dissimilar from their own is a prominent belief in popular culture and is reflected in the common expression “opposites attract.” It is thought that such differences are sought because it allows couples to divide tasks and pursue goals which are consistent with each member’s personality without much conflict. For example, a couple might experience little conflict if one member is motivated or driven by social rewards (e.g., remembers birthdays, focuses on raising children, etc.) and the other is focused on material rewards (e.g., earning a high income).

Although the notion of complementarity tends to be a common belief among lay persons, research examining assortative mating suggests that people tend to be attracted to others who are similar to themselves. It has been argued that such similarity might be sought because it produces feelings of attachment, fosters a sense of equality, and allows each partner to enhance or reinforce the self-concept of the (similar) other. Research has found that men and women alike have a propensity to desire romantic partners similar to themselves on traits such as extraversion, agreeableness, emotional stability, conscientiousness, and openness to experience. Studies have also found preferences for romantic partners who are similar with respect to certain demographic characteristics such as age, ethnicity, religious background, height, weight, socioeconomic status, values, political orientation, and physical qualities. As noted by David Buss, and in contrast to the popular definition of complementarity, the notion that people desire homogamy is one of the most replicated findings in human mating research.

Not only have studies suggested that individuals tend to desire a person who is similar (i.e., not complementary) to themselves, but such similarity is also related to relationship quality. Researchers have repeatedly found that similarity between romantic partners on various characteristics (e.g., age, socioeconomic status, personality, etc.) is linked to lower levels of divorce and higher levels of marital quality. Taken together, past research suggests that this kind of complementarity is not often sought in romantic partners nor does it typically lead to satisfying relationships.

Interpersonal Complementarity

Within the context of Interpersonal Theory the term complementarity refers to the principle that an individual's behavior tends to alter the behavior of his or her interaction

partner. This implies that interpersonal behaviors carry information regarding how the other should respond, and thus, interpersonal behaviors can encourage or restrain subsequent behavior from others. Although this notion of complementarity seems fairly straightforward, there have been various models presented to define exactly how complementarity occurs. Arguably, the two most common models are Robert Carson's model of complementarity and Jerry Wiggins' model of complementarity. Both of these models utilize the dimensions of warmth and dominance, which are often conceptualized as the primary components of social behavior, in order to define complementarity.

Carson's model of complementarity predicts that dominant or submissive behaviors encourage the opposite behavior in interaction partners (i.e., dominance invites submission, and submission invites dominance) and warm or cold behaviors encourage similar response in interaction partners (i.e., warmth invites warmth, and coldness invites coldness). For example, if person A acts in a warm and dominant manner, the likely response of person B would be to complement this style of behavior by acting in a warm and submissive manner. Wiggins' model applies social exchange theory to the dimensions of warmth and dominance in order to predict behaviors that are complementary. This definition suggests that every behavior carries with it information that grants or denies status (to the self and to the other) and grants or denies love (to the self and to the other) and a complementarity behavior is its logical match. For example, a dominant behavior tends to grant both status and love to the self, but only grants love without status to the other. The complementary behavior would therefore be a warm response, which tends to grant love without status to the self and both love and status to the other.

Past research examining which of these two models best predicts interpersonal behavior has been somewhat mixed. Researchers have found that the videotaped behaviors of randomly paired strangers tend to occur in a manner predicted by Carson's model of complementarity. However, others have suggested that support for Carson's model only occurs along the warmth dimensions (i.e., dominance does not induce submission, and vice versa). For example, researchers have found that participants who interacted with a confederate coached to act in either a dominant or warm manner tended to act in a similar manner in regard to warmth, but the dominant behavior of the confederate failed to evoke submission in the participants.

In sum, complementarity is most frequently defined as the contention that people tend to seek out other individuals with characteristics that are different from their own, but is also associated with the distinctly different notion that, during any dyadic interaction, the behaviors of both persons tend to elicit or constrain the behaviors of each other.

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See Also

Personality Traits, Effects on Relationships; Interpersonal Influence; Interpersonal Attraction

Further Readings

Carson, R. (1969). *Interaction concepts of personality*. Chicago: Aldine.

Markey, P. M., & Markey, C. N. (2007). Romantic ideals, romantic obtainment and

- relationship experiences: The complementarity of interpersonal traits among romantic partners. *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships*, 24, 517-534.
- Sadler, P., & Woody, E. (2003). Is who you are who you're talking to? Interpersonal style and complementarity in mixed-sex interactions. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 84, 80 – 96.
- Tracey, T. J. (2004). Levels of interpersonal complementarity: A simplex representation. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 30 (9), 1211 – 1225.