Does psychological flexibility influence liking?
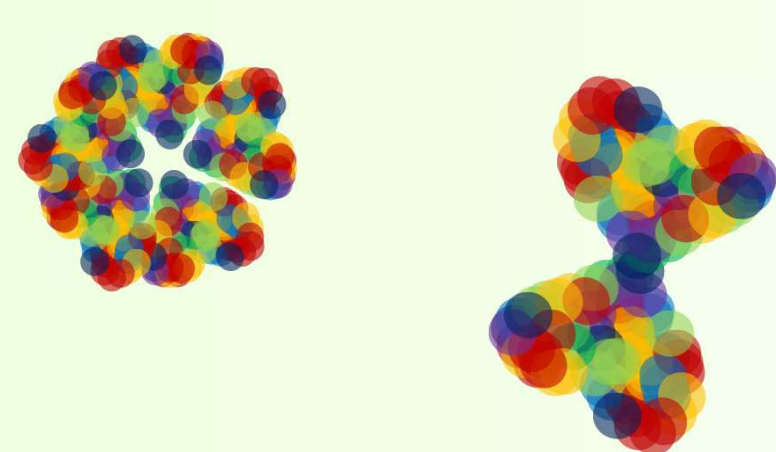
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Introduction

Psychological flexibility (being present and aware of your feelings and emotions, taking your thoughts not too seriously and watch feelings and thoughts non-judgmentally from a step back - perspective, being aware of your values and acting accordingly) was hypothesized to lead to a "compassionate style of communication that is attractive and desirable to other people" (Kashdan and Rottenberg, 2010). In a dyadic interaction, does psychologically flexible behavior by a person influence how much the person is liked by the partner after the conversation?

Methods

In the present study participants (N=139; 70 male; mean age 24.37 y, SD=4.38, age range 18–40 y) not acquainted with each other, were assigned to groups of 4 to 6 (same sex) members in a round robin design. They had a short introductory meeting, rated how much they liked each other (computer based, T1), then had a 5 min conversation (free choice of topic) and afterwards again rated how much they liked each other (T2). The 5 min dyadic interactions (N=618) were videotaped and rated by observers concerning psychological flexibility, humor and openness (2, 4, and 3 x 4 raters, starting at 1 min for a minimum of 2 min). The analyses of interpersonal perceptions and behaviors were based on the Social Relations Modell (SRM, Back and Kenny, 2010) to separate perceiver/target, actor/partner, and relationship effects.

Statistical analyses were performed using SPSS and R Studio. For the SRM calculations the R package TripleR (Schönbrodt et al., 2012) was used. The measurement of liking at T2 was corrected for initial liking (T1) by performing a regression and using the residues for correlations. This variable was named "change in liking".

Operationalization of variables

Liking (perception)
"I like this person"
"I would like to get to know this person"
"I would like to become friends with this person" (T2 only)

Openness (behavior)
- interested in partner
- intelligent/sophisticated
- unimaginative/mundane

Humor (behavior)
- laughing/makes laugh
- relaxed vs. serious/tense atmosphere
- positive: funny anecdotes, jokes about oneself,
- negative: jokes on others, distancing, aggressive, challenging remarks

Psychological flexibility (behavior)

"is responsive to feelings and mood of interaction partner"

"is present"
Contact with the present moment

Acceptance

Values

Psychological flexibility (Hayes et al., 2006)

"shows flexible behavior in the interactions"

Defusion

Committed Action

Self as Context

"does not take everything too seriously"

6 point Likert scale

liking: do not agree at all   do strongly agree
1   6

other variables: low   high manifestation

Results

Table 1: descriptive statistics and results of SRM

variable	min	Max	M	SD	reliability	perceiver/actor effect	target/partner effect	relationship effect[a]
liking T1	1.00	6.00	3.56	1.02	.82	10.8 (.41)**	24.8 (.61)**	64.4**
liking T2	1.00	6.00	3.65	1.07	.91	8.8 (.37)**	32.4 (.69)**	58.8**
psychological flexibility	1.00	6.00	3.57	0.82	.24	73.2 (.93)**	2.2 (.27)*	24.5**
humor	1.00	6.00	2.77	0.87	.63	65.8 (.90)**	4.4 (.37)**	29.8**
openness	1.00	6.00	3.69	0.70	.68	84.0 (.96)**	1.4 (.29)*	14.6**

M: mean, SD: standard deviation, reliability for liking T1 and T2: internal reliability (split-half/Cronbachs alpha), for other variables: intraclass correlation coefficient (ICC)

percentage of variance explained in %, *p<.05, ** p<.01, reliabilities in brackets, a: including error variance

Table 2: correlation coefficients

variable	change in liking (target effect)	psychological flexibility (actor effect)	humor (actor effect)	openness (actor effect)
change in liking (target effect)	1	.32**	.38**	.44**
psychological flexibility (actor effect)		1	.75**	.65**
humor (actor effect)			1	.53**
openness (perceiver effect)				1

*p < .05, ** p < .01

A significant correlation between psychologically flexible behavior and change in liking was obtained. High significant correlations between psychological flexibility and humor and openness were obtained.

Discussion, limitations, and way forward...

It has often been studied which traits, attributes, etc. influence interpersonal attraction/being liked (e.g. Back et al., 2011). It also seems that how you actually deal with what you got has some influence, too. Interestingly, psychological flexibility, humor, and openness seem to share some common factors.

However, the very low observer reliability for psychological flexibility actually means that the results' validity has to be questioned.

Reasons for the low ICC could be:
- Problems with how psychological flexibility was operationalized?
- Behaviors difficult to observe/low variability? → situation suitable? more conflicting situation?
- Instruction of observers → could be improved, e.g. include a training with examples?
- Low number of observers (2) → include more raters for behavior observation

... how can you contribute?

You are acquainted with psychological flexibility!
- How would you operationally define psychological flexibility in the context of the videotaped 5 min interactions for an observer?
- Specifically, are there values that could be considered as context-specific across individuals in this setting?
- What about „being open and connected"?
- How would you include „behaving according to individual values"?
- Would you support this research by being a volunteer for behavior observation to increase the number of raters (videos are in German)?

References

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