Similarity Between Friends and Romantic Partners in Moral Intuitions

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Background

Assortment, defined as the coupling of individuals based on their similarity, has been documented among both friends and romantic partners.1,2 Friends and romantic partners are similar to one another in their education levels, interests and hobbies, attractiveness, and social and political attitudes. In this study, we tested the hypothesis that individuals select relationship partners who are similar to themselves in the moral intuitions3-6 that underlie political attitudes. The five moral intuitions (foundations) refer to individuals’ concern for (1) caring and protecting from harm; (2) fairness and justice; (3) obedience and respect for authority; (4) purity and sanctity; and (5) loyalty and patriotism. We expected friends and romantic partners to hold similar views on these moral intuitions. In addition, because various studies suggest that people choose similar others as their relationship partners rather than become similar to their relationship partners over time,2,6 we expected that friends’ and partners’ relationship duration would not be associated with how similar they are.

Method

We approached male-male, male-female, and female-female dyads in a high-traffic lounging area of a public university campus. This naturalistic sampling method resulted in 87 pairs of same-sex friends, 38 pairs of opposite-sex friends, and 18 heterosexual dating couples. Upon consent, we independently assessed each dyad member’s standing on the five moral foundations as well as their perceptions of their friendship/relationship. The Moral Foundations Questionnaire consists of 20 items, to which people respond using a 7-point scale (Strongly disagree to Strongly agree). One sample item for each moral foundation is listed below:

- Care/Nurturance: “Compassion for those who are suffering is the most crucial virtue.”
- Fairness/Justice: “When the government makes laws, the number one priority should be ensuring that everyone is treated fairly.”
- Authority/Respect: “Respect for authority is something all children need to learn.”
- Purity/Sanctity: “I would call some acts wrong on the grounds that they are unnatural or disgusting.”
- Ingroup Loyalty: “Loyalty to one’s group is more important than one’s individual concerns.”

Results

Sample Overview

Table: Sample Overview

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Moral Foundation</th>
<th>Men</th>
<th>Women</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Care/Nurturance</td>
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Hypothesis 1 was partially supported:

Relationship partners placed similar value on Care/Nurturance, Authority/Respect, and Purity/Sanctity.

Hypothesis 2 was supported:

Relationship duration was not associated with degree of similarity between relationship partners.

Discussion

We conducted this study to test the primary prediction that relationship partners hold similar moral intuitions. The most consistent and strong assortment was in attitudes toward purity, a moral foundation accounting for significant variance in people’s stance on issues such as abortion, same-sex marriage, and immigration.4 We found no links between relationship duration and degree of similarity between partners, which suggests that individuals select relationship partners who are similar to themselves rather than become similar to their relationship partners over time. We might expect that individuals who select a partner who is similar to their partner show more individual stability over time in their moral attitudes, relative to those who are less similar to their partner.

We are now preparing to begin a 6-month follow-up of our participants. To the extent that holding similar morals enhances friends’ and romantic partners’ compatibilities, we expect that friends and romantic partners who are more similar to each other will be more likely to still be together or report an increased level of relationship closeness since the original data collection.

References


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