

Don't the Girls' Get Prettier at Closing Time: A Country and Western Application to Psychology

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Abstract. Despite psychology's attempts at keeping pace with hypotheses generated by song writers, research dealing with perceived physical attraction has fallen far behind. In an attempt to close the gap, a study was conducted which confirmed Gilley's (1975) prediction that "all the girls get prettier at closing time, they all get to look like movie stars..." A reactance interpretation based on predecisional preferences validated Gilley's observation "ain't it funny, ain't it strange, the way a man's opinions change when he starts to face that lonely night."

The jukebox, a peculiarly American institution, has long been a rich source of social psychological truths. Many a hypothesis is available to the researcher for a mere quarter (three hypotheses for 50¢). Although numerous musical styles--big band, disco, rock and roll--offer testable ideas, Country and Western music (hereafter C & W) proposes an impressive medley of themes that are particularly amenable to both drive reduction and information processing interpretations.

A common misconception is that C & W deals only with "mama or trains or trucks or prison or gettin' drunk" (Coe, 1974). Closer inspection, however, reveals an abundance of rich motifs encompassing such theories as equity ("Your cheatin' heart will tell on you"--Williams, ca. 1939), dissonance ("A boy named Sue"--Cash, ca. 1970), and self-perception ("I was almost persuaded [until seeing]...the reflection of my wedding band,"--Wynette, ca. 1968). One of America's all-time hits, reinforcement theory, is of course well represented (e.g., "If you've got the money, honey, I've got the time,"--Frizzel, ca. 1951).

Despite the valiant efforts of psychologists to keep pace with musical trends, the topic of perceived physical attractiveness has slipped behind. A particularly relevant line of research has been suggested within the context of reactance theory and predecisional judgements of attractiveness of alternatives. A classic finding by Linder and Crane (1970) demonstrated that as time to make a decision diminishes, the perceived attractiveness of the alternatives converge. In their study, subjects rated the attractiveness of two alternatives immediately after learning the amount of time until making a final decision (either 3, 8, or 15 minutes). It was found that the perceived attractiveness of the alternatives was more similar in the 3- as opposed to the 15-minute condition. Although not emphasized by the authors, the less preferred alternative increased in attractiveness as decision time approached relative to the preferred alternative. Further, inspection of ratings of the alternatives demonstrates that both alternatives were seen as more attractive when subjects were given 3 minutes to make the decision than if they had 15 minutes.

These data are consistent with Wicklund's (1974) assertion that individuals exhibit greater liking for threatened behaviors, and that a time barrier to making a decision serves as an effective threat to one's freedom in selecting an alternative.

In line with this reasoning, country star Mickey Gilley (1975) has advanced the hypothesis that individuals of the opposite sex are seen as more attractive as the time to decide whether to interact with them decreases. To Gilley's credit, he has assisted the researcher by suggesting a methodology by which to test the hypothesis that "all the girls get prettier at closing time."

Method

Subjects. One hundred and three subjects, 52 males and 51 females, were selected from three drinking establishments within walking distance of a respectable Southern university. Subjects were selected as randomly as possible with the restrictions that the potential subject was not engaged in conversation with a member of the opposite sex, or that the subject was not intoxicated, incapacitated or otherwise inaccessible (e.g., in the midst of a group). Subjects were selected and approached by a same-sex experimenter.

Procedure.

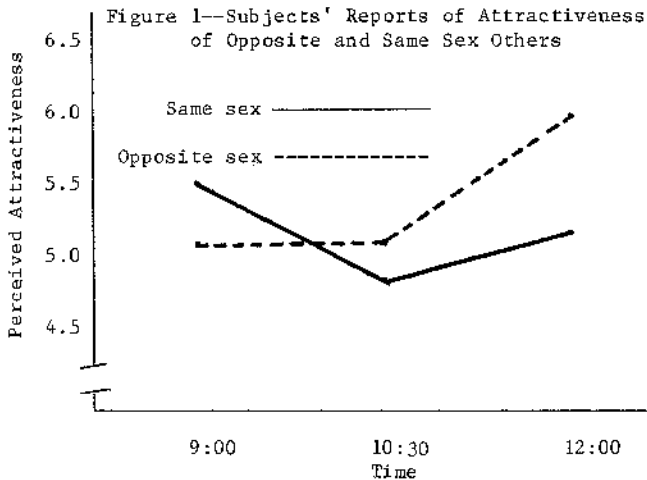
"If I could rate them on a scale from one to ten, looking for a 9 but 8 could fit right in..." (Gilley, 1975)

Three male-female experimenter teams entered each of the three bars at three preselected times (9:00 P.M., 10:30 P.M., and 12:00 Midnight) on a Thursday evening. The bars closed at 12:30 A.M. Each experimenter couple attended a different bar at each of the three times. Each experimenter selected and approached the first available same-sexed subject and asked if he or she would object to answering a couple of questions for a psychology study. All subjects agreed to participate.

After the initial introductions, the experimenter queried, "On a scale from 1 to 10, where 1 indicates 'not attractive', 5 indicates 'average', and 10 indicates 'extremely attractive', how would you rate the [opposite-sex individuals] here tonight?" After receiving an answer, the experimenter then asked, "if you were a [member of the opposite sex], how would you rate the [members of your own sex] here tonight, using the same scale as before?" Note that subjects were asked to make a global judgment of all the opposite- or same-sex individuals present in the establishment. The experimenter thanked the subject and departed.

Results and Discussion

A between-within unweighted-means analysis of variance was computed, using sex of subject and time as the between-subject variables, and same- versus opposite-sex evaluation as the within-subject variable. No main effect or interaction attained significance for sex of subject, indicating that males and females rated both same and opposite sexes comparably. As can be seen in Figure 1, Gilley's prediction was confirmed. A significant time x opposite-same sex interaction emerged, $F(2, 97) = 3.07, p = .05$. A separate linear trend for the time variable x trials interaction ($F(1, 97) = 5.47, p < .05$) supported the prediction that opposite-sex persons increased in attractiveness over time relative to same-sex evaluations. The quadratic trend for time x opposite-same sex interaction did not attain significance ($p = .20$). Finally, in order to test directly the closing time hypothesis a simple a priori contrast was computed on the ratings of perceived attractiveness of opposite-sex individuals from 10:30 to midnight. As predicted, opposite-sex evaluations increased significantly, $t(80) = 2.50, p < .02$. No other effects approached statistical significance.



The results support the prediction that all threatened alternatives increase in perceived attractiveness as the decision time approaches. The data are consistent with reactance theory (Brehm, 1966) if one assumes that subjects felt free to meet or go home with a member of the opposite sex. When the freedom to select a partner was threatened due to the encroaching time deadline, the persons increased their liking for the threatened alternatives. Unlike subjects in the Linder and Crane (1970) study, our barroom participants were not assured of any one alternative. The general freedom to select a member of the opposite sex was progressively threatened "as the clock keeps ticking" (Lynn, 1974), with the result being increased attractiveness of all threatened options. An alternative way of interpreting the results is within dissonance theory. If the subjects were committed to going home with a person of the opposite sex, it would be dissonant to consider an unattractive partner. The most efficient way of reducing such dissonance could be to increase the perceived attractiveness of the prospective alternatives. Thus, either reactance or dissonance theory could account for the findings depending on the role of pre-decisional commitment. "Ain't it funny, ain't it strange, the way a man's opinions change, when he starts to face that lonely night" (Gilley, 1975).

A possible problem in the study is that Midnight subjects may have not been "feeling any pain at closing time" (Haggard, ca. 1970) relative to more sober 9:00 and 10:30 subjects. Perhaps differential intake of alcohol affects evaluations such that tipsy subjects see members of the opposite sex as more attractive. Such a possibility cannot be ruled out. Future research and/or introspective examination by the reader is encouraged. It must be noted that alcohol clearly does not increase all evaluations and thus cannot be the sole underlying variable producing the results. Similarly, a gradual increase in the attractiveness of the clientele of the various bars could not explain the differential ratings for same- vs. opposite-sex evaluations over time.

It could be argued that the present findings generalize only to "rednecks (who)...drive a '57 GMC pickup truck" (Walker, 1973). How-

ever, given that the drinking establishments in the present research catered to predominantly upper-middle class college students, it can tentatively be concluded that the "closing time" phenomenon is pervasive throughout all socio-musical strata.

Social psychology can proudly claim to have narrowed the gap between hypotheses generated by C & W musicians and their empirical validation. But the thoughtful social scientist should remain vigilant in the honky-tonk as well as in the laboratory; for one never knows, as Duncan (1976) notes, when "some old lonesome song will take you by surprise."

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Footnotes

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¹Regrettably, the music world has not yet adopted APA's guidelines for non-sexist language. Any quotations using "girls" should read as "members of the opposite sex."