Fostering Relational Closeness Via Shared Extraordinary Experiences

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We demonstrate that sharing extraordinary (vs. ordinary) experiences foster interpersonal closeness (even in a new relationship), which is driven by the (mis)conception that one is knowledgeable of who the other is (such as knowing his/her unique preferences). We find that relationship type (new vs. old) is an important boundary condition.

[to cite]:

[url]:
http://www.acrwebsite.org/volumes/1019369/volumes/v43/NA-43

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT
Humans are social animals. We not only share a significant portion of our life experiences with others but also benefit from it. Prior research has suggested that sharing experiences can bring people closer (Pinel, Long, Landau, Alexander, and Pyszczynski 2006) and make them happier (Caprariello and Reis 2012), compared to experiencing events alone. However, does such positive effect of shared experiences hold for any type of experiences shared with anyone in our lives?

In this research, we posit that different types of shared experiences would differentially influence the quality of the relationship between two people and that this would depend on the type of relationship the two people are currently in. Specifically, we focus on two types of experiences – ordinary vs. extraordinary – shared with another person. Extraordinary experiences are those that go beyond the commonality of our everyday lives whereas ordinary experiences are those that are within it (Bhattcharjee and Mogilner 2014; Sussman and Alter 2012).

We hypothesize that an individual would feel closer, connected, and similar to another person whom they share an extraordinary (vs. ordinary) experience with, even when they had just met the other person. We believe that this would be due to the ‘defining’ characteristic of extraordinary shared experiences (Bhattcharjee and Mogilner 2014). That is, when someone shares an extraordinary, unusual experience with another person, s/he might (mis)conceive that the other person must be the type to engage in or perhaps even enjoy such experiences, leading her/him to, perhaps mistakenly, believe that s/he is knowledgeable of the other person’s ‘extraordinary, unique’ preferences. Given this idea, we further hypothesize that the closeness-fostering effect of shared extraordinary experiences would be most pronounced when the two individuals are still in the process of getting to know each other (e.g., new friends or people they had just met). For individuals who already have deep knowledge of each other (e.g., very old friends), extraordinary shared experiences would not contribute much to feelings of obtaining further knowledge about the other person and subsequently to feelings of closeness.

In the first study, we predict and find that people feel greater closeness and similarity with someone whom they share an extraordinary (vs. ordinary) experience. In Studies 2a and 2b, we examine whether the effect of experience on closeness holds when the other is a friend. We find that people feel greater closeness with a friend whom they share an extraordinary (vs. ordinary) experience. In Studies 3 and 4, we examine a potential underlying mechanism of the basic effect identified in prior studies. We find evidence that the effect of extraordinary and ordinary experience on relational closeness/similarity stems from beliefs about knowing the other’s unique preferences. People felt like they knew the other person more when they shared an extraordinary (vs. ordinary) experience, which then led them to feel closer and more similar to him/her. In Study 4, we also identify a boundary condition for the effect of experiences on relational closeness and similarity. In prior studies, we demonstrate that the effect occurs when two individuals are in the process of getting to know each other (e.g., relatively new friends or people they had just met). We explore the idea that for individuals who already have deep knowledge of each other (e.g., very old friends), extraordinary shared experiences would not increase feelings of obtaining further knowledge about the other person and subsequently to feelings of closeness. We predict and find a moderated mediation in which sharing an extraordinary (vs. ordinary) experience increases people’s feelings of similarity with a new relationship partner (e.g., new acquaintance) but not with a relatively old relationship partner (e.g., very old friend) because of feelings of knowing the other better.

In sum, the present research tests the relational consequence of sharing experiences that vary on the ordinary-extraordinary dimension. The first set of studies (Studies 1-2b) demonstrates the basic effect of type of experience shared on closeness and similarity to the other. Studies 3 and 4 then tested a potential mechanism – feelings of knowing the other person (such as his/her unique preferences). In Study 4, we also identify a boundary condition in which sharing an extraordinary vs. ordinary experience with a relatively old (vs. new) relationship partner did not lead to changes in interpersonal closeness and similarity. Overall, these findings contribute to the paucity of research on the impact of experiences on the relationship between two individuals, whether they recently met or knew each other for a very long period of time.

REFERENCES