

Barbour, A. (1994b). A Reexamination of the Tele Effect. *The Journal of Group Psychotherapy, Psychodrama, & Sociometry*, 47(3), 114–125.

A Reexamination of the Tele Effect

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ABSTRACT. Sometimes our awareness of it is distinct and sometimes it is barely perceptible, but we often find that we "hit it off" or "are in synch" with some people and not with others, and that however we feel about them, they in turn often feel the same way about us. This mutuality of feeling with another person is what Moreno called

"the tele effect." The variable of tele has been observed by social scientists since the 1930s, and yet what actually happens when tele is experienced is not well understood.

In fact it might be said that it is often misunderstood, possibly because of the metaphorical language that has been used to describe it, possibly because empathy is difficult to conceptualize, and possibly because empirical research in interpersonal perception and attraction has developed only in recent years. In this article, I examine some of the relevant social and behavioral science literature in communication theory, interpersonal perception, interpersonal attraction, and empathy in order to advance some possible explanations for the tele-effect phenomenon and to formulate a reconceptualization of the construct.

WITH THE POSSIBLE EXCEPTION OF ROLE, one would find it difficult to identify a concept more central and more basic to Moreno's psychodrama, sociometry, and group psychotherapy than that of tele. And yet it is also difficult to find a presumably scientific term

more cloaked in mysticism, mys-tery, and misunderstanding. In the original *Who Shall Survive?*, Moreno (1934) included the word in a glossary of 15 terms essential to an understanding of his work in sociometry. In that volume, he defined it as "a feeling which is projected into the distance; the simplest unit of feeling transmitted from one individual towards another" (p. 432). In the discussion of the term, however, he went well beyond that (pp. 158-164). It is not clear whether he was using magnetism as a metaphor/illustration or whether he believed that there was an actual magnetism between people, but he talked of "the attractive power of animal bodies," "a magnetic and mysterious fluid which passes from one person to another," a "certain sensitivity," "affinity," a "common soul," a "social physiology," and "reciprocating physiological organs which interact with each other." He said that there were innumerable varieties of attractions and repulsions between individuals that needed a common denom-inator, which had a socio-physiological basis. Because feelings were directed "from one individual to another," they were "projected into the distance." For that reason, he chose the Greek word, tele, which means "at a distance," to explain the phenomenon and represent that common denominator.

By the time the second version of *Who Shall Survive?* was published (1953), Moreno had expanded the place of tele in sociometry to the point that he explained it at length in 12 different places with further elaborations in another 25 subsections in the book. He still defined it the same way as in the first version of the book as a "feeling transmitted" from one individual to another (p. 314). He spoke of tele as "two-way empathy," with transference as its psychopathological variation. Tele explained the process that attracts individuals to one another or that repels them; it was also the flow of feeling of which the social atom and networks were

apparently composed. Prior to the 1930s, when psychology was mainly individual psychology, it was generally thought that feelings emerged in the individual exclusively and were purely individual projections completely unrelated to what the other person might be experiencing. Moreno's observation was that one-way projected feelings did not make sense sociometrically. Rather, he proposed that they should be conceived of as two-way or multiple structures. At least theoretically, there was a potential for a complementarity of feelings. Moreover, sociometric tests could demonstrate that the feelings that people had for others were reciprocated well beyond randomness. In essence, we cannot observe tele directly, but we know that it is there. The sociometric test is deceptively simple, but it was a major advance in social psychology because it was a way of operationalizing tele and of demonstrating its existence (Lindzey & Byrne, 1968). Moreno explained that social atoms were composed of tele structures, and these social atoms were parts of still larger networks that were parts of communities that were in turn parts of society itself. The whole social fabric of society, according to Moreno, was an attraction-rejection system, the threads of which were composed of tele.

Metaphysics and Misunderstandings

If tele is as central to the formation of society as Moreno believed it to be, then what actually happens between two people so that the tele-effect experience results? Is it really conceivable that there is an actual "magnetism" between two people as Moreno suggested, or that feelings are "projected" or "transmitted" at a distance from one to the other and that transmission results in our mutual attractions or our affinity for one another? Given our present understanding of social science, that does not seem likely. Moreno's explanation of the phenomenon now seems more like a metaphysical than a scientific one. How do we explain things that we know to be true

and yet cannot see? Sometimes, it appears, we theorize, we create constructs, and sometimes the construct withstands scrutiny and sometimes it does not. In this case, it does not. All sorts of things might be going on when two people perceive one another and interact and have mutual feelings, but they do not include either magnetism or transmissions at a distance. And yet, possibly because the tele effect is such a curious and marvelous phenomenon, one can find people who persist in believing that tele is some form of Morenean magic, and that there are actually some mysterious, inexplicable, invisible electrical currents that are circulating in the air between people that result in shared feelings.

Moreover, if Moreno's conceptualization of tele does not hold up, then the definition that has come forward to us unchanged since 1934 does not hold up either and in the end will have to be revised to incorporate a newer and different understanding of what occurs. Whereas that idea might be disturbing to some people who regard *Who Shall Survive?* as a sort of inspired text, and hence flawless and unchangeable, I doubt that it would bother Moreno at all.

In answer to a specific question about that, Moreno once told me that because of entropy, all closed systems would eventually self-destruct, and that he saw psychodrama and sociometry as an open system that would and should change as different information became available and as our understandings changed. To treat Moreno's work as a closed system, then, would be a disservice to him; to regard it as something to be improved upon would be a courtesy.

One reason that the tele experience seems magical is that we quite often have these feelings of attraction or rejection for people we know very little about, and another reason is that sometimes those responses we have seem to take so little time to form. How something like this happens is not easily explained or understood. If it is not magic and it is not magnetism or "recip-rocating physiological organs" or transmitted feelings, then what is it? In this article, I

shall advance some possible explanations based on the literature in the social and behavioral sciences that bear on this question.

Purposeful Perception

Let us begin with a scene. There is a room with a single person standing in it. Another person enters the room, and the two persons view one another.

They have not spoken, but they are already interacting. We need not speak to interact. What might be going on at that moment of meeting and in the moments that immediately follow? Any perception is the result of a highly complicated weighing and judging process. As a person perceives anything, the mind of that person goes through a whole host of factors and cues based on what the stimuli are that are available to be perceived. As the stimuli become more complicated, the factors that must be integrated may run into the thousands based on the past experience of the perceiver. Instead of sorting through the different cues and separating them, what a person normally does is merge them into some kind of total impression. That is, all of those factors and cues are integrated in the mind of the perceiver into a single value judgment.

The process of reaching a value judgment is by no means a random or chaotic procedure. It is a purposeful activity. What might that purpose be? Sometimes the purpose is highly specific, such as meeting a stranger, joining a group, attending a meeting, or seeing an old friend. But there are more basic purposes too, which might be described as something having to do with human nature. Psychologists in the area of sensation and perception (Combs & Snygg, 1959) say that when we perceive anything, what we are trying to do is make sense out of the experience, giving meaning to our surroundings, including other people. Underlying these ideas is the

assumption from a number of schools of psychology that all human behavior, including our perceptions, grows out of an attempt to create, maintain, and enhance a sense of self.

A person responds to the world as he or she sees it. An individual does what she believes is best for herself in the situation in which she finds herself. How she sees herself influences her behavior including her perceptions of what is around her. If she sees the environment as enhancing and facilitating, her behavior will be positive and responsive. If she sees it as dangerous and threatening, her behavior will be defensive and withdrawn. If she sees herself as capable and wanted and effective, she may be willing to risk herself in an encounter with another person and may see that person as benign or even friendly. If she sees herself as incapable, unwanted, or ineffective, she may see that other person as intimidating or dangerous. How we view the other person naturally involves how that person appears to us, but how that person appears to us also involves how we see ourselves. How we perceive something has a lot to do with what we carry along with us to perceive it with and what our expectations are, based on our past experience.

Because perception is a purposeful activity, that purpose may even include guesses about the purposes of the other person, such as whether the person is a rival, whether the person will want to control, whether the person will be helpful, whether the person wants something. An extremely important part of that other person's purposes has been called meta and meta-meta level perspectives (Laing, Philipson, & Lee, 1966). This work is based on psychiatrist R. D. Laing's clinical experience with problem relationships and with mis-perceptions. It describes direct perceptions (How I see you), meta-perceptions (How I see you seeing me), and meta-meta perceptions (How I see you seeing me see you) An important part of that research in his context is that when we perceive another person, in forming our impression, we might even

be taking into account how that person might be perceiving us, or even how they might perceive us perceiving them when we form our total impression.

Finally, what we know about this perception process is that it takes just seconds or, in some cases, fractions of a second and that it is largely unconscious. Although we are by no means limited to visual perceptions and we take other senses into account when we are integrating factors and cues, we are primates in the animal kingdom, and when primates perceive, they are primarily dependent on what they see. Seeing does not take much time, and that is mainly what we are doing when we are sizing up the other individual and forming a total impression. More frequently than not, we are largely unaware of the process while it is going on. That is, when we are perceiving something, we are not consciously aware that we are doing it. There is no small voice in our heads that is self-conscious or self-aware of the process and that is telling us what we are doing while it is going on. In fact, if there were, it would slow down and further complicate an already complicated process.

If we can return to that room with the two people standing in it and viewing each other, we can see that a variety of things are occurring that might influence how they might feel about one another. We can say that interpersonal perception is a complicated weighing and judging process that, at least initially for humans, is mainly visual; that in responding to the cues and factors we gain from the stimuli that are available, we integrate them to form a total impression; that it is a purposeful activity that may take into account one's own self-concept, one's own past experiences, and the purposes of the other; that it is largely unconscious; and that it does not take much time. Let us say now that the two persons in the room begin to talk with one another and find things out that begin to reduce their ambiguity about one another. What might then be exchanged between the two people that could result in their having mutually positive or negative

feelings about each other? There is a substantial body of research that forms the answer to this question, which I will attempt to summarize.

Interactions and Attractions

Whom do we like and dislike, and who likes or dislikes us, and what would explain it? Instead of a single answer to these questions, there are a number of answers because a number of variables can be used to account for interpersonal attraction. Some of them are much more important than others, but most of them contribute in some way to what we find attractive in others and they in us. One of those variables is physical attractiveness. Usually, when we say that someone is attractive, that is what we are talking about. It is true that our society makes all sorts of disclaimers about the importance of physical attractiveness in our relations with others. We are told not to judge a book by its cover, that beauty is only skin deep, that beauty is as beauty does, and that beauty is in the eye of the beholder. But beauty is not only in the eye of the beholder; there are culture-wide, generally accepted standards for who is attractive and who is not that virtually everyone is acquainted with and reminded of constantly through the media. Moreover, the existence in our society of a multibillion dollar cosmetics industry tells us that someone is trying to look good according to social standards. Add to this the time, attention, and money spent on exercise equipment, dieting, grooming, fashion, cosmetic surgery, and adornments and we may get the impression that physical appearance is all we care about. The relation between physical appearance and our perception of people is a strong one. We simply do not perceive attractive people the same way we perceive unattractive ones, and we do not treat them the same way. We associate positive personality traits with attractive people.

Attractive people are thought to be more sensitive, popular, kind, interesting, strong, poised, modest, sociable, outgoing and exciting than unattractive ones.

Attractive people are expected to hold better jobs, have more successful marriages, and lead happier and more fulfilling lives (Berscheid & Walster, 1972). Physical attractiveness is a critical standard by which we form our first impressions and our expectations of others. Consequently, it matters most at the beginning of a relationship when we have very little else to go on.

Proximity matters in the formation of our relations with others. All other things being equal, the closer we are geographically to another person, the more highly probable it is that we will like one another. There is an irresistible logic to this idea. We cannot interact with those we do not come in contact with, and we cannot form relationships with those we do not interact with. We can come in contact with and interact more easily with people we are closer to geographically. If we are closer physically, the probability is greater that we will interact and have a relationship. People who are more centrally located in a neighborhood or in a building will have more opportunities for relations with others than people who are more distant or peripheral simply because of where they are situated. Associated with the variable of location is the likelihood that people who come from the same geographical space will also share a similar background and will have something in common or be in some way similar.

The influence of "having something in common," or what is called perceived similarity, is without doubt the most powerful and the most experimentally predictable variable in interpersonal attraction, but it is made up of a number of smaller categories that vary in their importance. A couple of qualifications go along with this particular explanation. One is that perceived similarity may not be actual similarity; because people believe themselves to be similar does not guarantee that they are. Another is that similarity is relative, so one has to take

into account that a person may or may not be similar based on some kind of internal comparison standard. Persons who normally would have nothing to do with one another might become friendly if they find themselves together in a crowd of strangers or in a foreign country, that is, among people who are seen as even more dissimilar than they are.

In spite of the ancient adage that tells us that opposites attract, the reverse is actually true: We are attracted to people who are like us. If someone is like you, how could they not be acceptable? This includes physical similarity and similarity of personality. Generally, we choose those of the same race or ethnic group, those who are physically similar to us, because that is what we are used to, and we tend not to prefer physical extremes who appear very different from us. People who have been given batteries of personality tests and who have tested out as alike in personality tend to prefer one another. This variable also includes similarity of stress and anxiety. People who have shared ordeals, strife, or tribulations feel a common bond and an attachment to each other, perhaps because only those people know and understand what one has been through and has experienced.

The most reliable of all of the predictors of attraction is similarity of attitudes, beliefs, and values. Attitudes are an available and measurable variable and have been much researched during the past 60 years. Time after time, attitude scales have been compared with measures of interpersonal attraction, and time after time, they have been shown to covary significantly. Similar attitudes go with increased liking. Fritz Heider (1958; Benesh-Weiner, 1988) evolved a balance theory, now referred to as A-B-X, to explain how this relation between attitude and liking takes place. What it comes down to is that it is easier for us to have the same attitudes as the people that we like, and it is easier to like the people who have the same attitudes, in order to avoid the psychological stress that results from an inconsistency of attitudes about people and

attitude objects. We prefer people who have the same values we do, such as those about politics and religion, and are drawn to them. Dissimilar values cause us to reject them and to draw away (see Brown, 1965, pp. 549-609).

Balance and dissonance theories apply in some other areas of attraction as well. We are attracted to winners, and we reject losers. People who are perceived as successful are usually popular, and those who are perceived as unsuccessful are unpopular. We like to believe that people get what they deserve. If people are losers, we prefer to believe that they deserve to lose. If people are successful, we prefer to believe that they deserve to be successful. These conclusions fit with our notions of justice. If we hear about an accident, we tend to believe that the victim was somehow to blame and that the blame increases along with the seriousness of the accident. We do not want to believe that the guilty go unpunished or that the innocent suffer, so we rationalize success and failure in order to minimize our discomfort (Lerner, 1971).

We dislike people who punish us and like people who reward us. We like people from whom we get the behavior we want and dislike people from whom we get the behavior we do not want. This response indicates that our emotions, our feelings about others, have an external explanation. When we have a feeling, we look for what or who provoked it. Behaviorist or reinforcement psychology explains this by saying that we seek reward and avoid punishment, so we seek out people who reward us with the behavior we want and avoid people who are punishing to be with. To do otherwise would create a dissonance. Similarly, we dislike people we have treated badly and like people we have treated well. If we have mistreated another, we tend to lower our opinion of that person so that our opinion is consistent with our treatment. The same thing is true in reverse. If we have treated someone well, they must be deserving, so we raise our

opinion. Because we want to avoid dissonance, our liking or disliking of another is tied both to how that person has treated us and how we have treated that person.

If we go back to the room in which the two people are together in proximity, we can now identify even more things that might influence how they feel about one another. Physical appearance is the most immediately available information about the other person, including whether the two people are in some way similar. But when they interact, other information may become pre-dominant. They will begin to discover tone of voice, regional dialect, social class, background, education, temperament, and religion. They may also discover perceived similarity of personality, attitudes, beliefs, and values, whether they have shared stressful experiences, whether they are perceived as successful, and how they have treated one another. Attraction to another may end up being a combination of all of these. John Money (1986) claims that each person has what he calls a "love map." He believes the mental maps are developed between the ages of 5 and 8 or younger in response to family, friends, and experiences. In part, the map is what the children are used to and are comfortable with based on their homes and how their parents and others treated them. Certain things about friends, relatives, and acquaintances will be appealing or unappealing, and they will become a part of memories. Gradually these memories will begin to take on a pattern, becoming a subliminal template for what is attractive or unattractive. As a person grows, the unconscious map takes on the shape and composition of a proto-image for what is attractive and preferred in others and for what is not. The proto-image can solidify and can be quite specific about appearance, body, race, color, temperament, laugh, patience, voice, clothing, smile, social class, and values. A person may already have constructed some basic elements of preferred others and need only actually see someone who falls within these parameters in order to be attracted. This explanation says that attraction is the result of a

combination of things about the other person that matches the map or proto-image in one's unconscious memory. In addition to the swiftness with which we perceive others, this is a further explanation for why an attraction may proceed with an apparent minimum of information.

Social Sensitivity

Empathy is one of those words that is difficult to pin down. We know, for example, that empathy may exist between actors and audiences and that they are often responding to one another, and that this influences further responses as they continue to interact. Part of a good performance is having actors who understand what the audience is experiencing. Empathy suggests an exchange of feelings and some mutual understanding. The word originated in 1897 as "einfühlend," meaning "objective motor mimicry," and was translated as "empathy" in 1908 by Edward B. Titchener of Cornell University. If you watch a football player straining to catch a pass and find that you are simultaneously leaning hard against the person next to you, it is because you are engaging in objective motor mimicry as you empathize with the athlete. Empathy includes an accurate understanding of the other person's thoughts and motives and emotions. Redmond (1985) defined it as responses that demonstrate "an understanding of the other's internal state." An empathic person would have the ability to "decenter" (become less egocentric) and exhibit "social sensitivity," even if only for a brief time. This would involve an ability to establish rapport, take the role of the other, and anticipate feelings, reactions, and behavior (Barbour, 1981).

A line of research at the University of Denver (Larson, et al., 1978) established the relationship between interpersonal competency and empathy. Imagine the following scene. You enter an elementary school playground looking for the site of a meeting in the school building.

There is a child on the playground, a 7-year-old girl. You do not know how to get to the lunchroom where the meeting is being held, so you ask the girl. What you want are accurate directions so you can find the room. The girl might just say, "It's in there." Or she might pause and think to herself, "If I were that person, what would I have to do to get to the lunchroom? I guess I'd go in the front door and turn right and at the end of the hall, I'd turn left, and there would be the lunch room." She might change roles with you briefly. An interpersonally competent child would know how much information was necessary to provide you with the directions you needed because she could empathize with being you and going there. In some cases, "It's in there," might be enough, but then again, it might not be. Usually, the more disoriented a person is, the more information we need to provide. If the child is unable even briefly to put herself in your role, we would say that she lacked an ability to empathize and was also less competent interpersonally. It is easier to provide a helpful answer if you can understand what the other person's needs are. Empathy goes beyond mere information and accuracy to include feelings. An empathic 7-year-old might also take into account what it is like to be going to a meeting at a school, what it is like to be lost, and what it is like to have to rely on a 7-year-old for directions.

If we can take this ability or inability to empathize and place it in the context of the discussion of tele, we may be able to see some applications. Some people lack social sensitivity and are unable to take the roles of others, even briefly, and are typically seen as interpersonally incompetent individuals. They have no idea what is going on in the minds of the others because they cannot "decenter" from themselves. They cannot understand others' motives or feelings. Moreno did not say that everyone experienced tele or that it worked all of the time. But some people do have that ability, even very young ones. They can take the role of the other, can

empathize, can be sensitive to the other's thoughts and feelings, and can be responsive to them. In that con-text, it becomes easier to see how that empathy might even include mutual positive and negative feelings that people have about one another.

Relationship Transactions

The attempts to arrive at accurate models of human communication have undergone an interesting transformation in the past century. The first stage of development was called the action stage and occurred between 1890 and the 1930s. It was drawn from linear mechanics and focused on what the sender of a message would have to do to establish communication. How must the speaker act? The second stage (from approximately the 1940s through the 1960s) was called the interaction stage, as theorists became concerned with control and added the concept of feedback to the model. Control could only be achieved, they reasoned, if the sender knew how the receiver was responding to the message, so a feedback loop was added to let the sender have that infor-mation. To this model was added the element of time, showing that at Time 1 there was a sender and a receiver and at Time 2 the sender became the receiver and the receiver the sender. At Time 3, the roles reversed again, signifying turn taking. The third stage of model development was from the 1960s to the present time. In it, transactional models have been used to show that human communication is not a linear process and that at any given time, the two interactants are both simultaneously sending and receiving messages from one another and are constantly in the process of making adjustments to the messages they are exchanging regardless of which one is talking (Smith & Williamson, 1977). (Consider how you adjust whatever you say in midsentence based on your responses to the facial cues of the other person.) Human interaction is not a simple turn-taking of alternating speakers but a very fluid dynamic process of constant transaction

between two people, each highly dependent upon the messages of the other. Add to this transactional interdependency one further element. Anthropologist Gregory Bateson (1970, 1972) pointed out that all human statements are made up of an object level and a relationship level. Whenever we send a message, we actually send two at the same time. The message on the object level is about whatever it is we are talking about, and the other one is a parallel metamessage about how the two people are relating to each other. Sometimes we may understand very well what we are being told but may not like the way in which we are being told it because it disconfirms us. People do not often talk directly about their relationships, but they usually know what that relationship is. More often than not, the message about the relationship that is being communicated is a nonverbal one and is understood because of facial expression or the paralinguistics of the spoken language. Facial expression and paralinguistics are usually how we communicate emotion, including emotions we might have about the other person. We respond to these relationship messages but not usually on a conscious level. They are a part of all of those factors and cues that we integrate when we form an impression of the other person, and they of us. Based on this perspective, we could say that relationships, whether positive or negative, are being negotiated or transacted between people as they interact, and that each content message sent and received also is accompanied by a parallel message about the relationship as it develops.

The accumulation of this information about how we perceive each other, how we are attracted to, empathize with, and communicate with each other, and how we send relationship messages to each other provides a variety of explanations for why positive or negative feelings might be felt and even reciprocated. When two people are in the presence of one another, and aware of one another, even if they have not yet begun talking, it is not as if nothing is going on.

The mere presence of another person is sufficient to set off all sorts of responses in both persons. No wonder that Moreno might have thought the air was "charged" between them. And then, when the two begin to interact and relate, they also find out more about one another and reduce the ambiguity between them, discovering whether there is the possibility for closeness or distancing, whether there is interest or disinterest. The tele effect seems to be less a mystical event and more the natural consequence of such interaction.

Based on this discussion, one could say that tele is feelings of attraction or rejection between people and is the result of a dynamic and transactional process of impression formation and ambiguity reduction. The tele effect is a mutuality of these positive and/or negative feelings between two persons that results in an increased probability for mutual sociometric choices. One could also conclude from this discussion, that the tele effect is based on a sensitivity to interpersonal perceptual cues, is integrated into a total impression, and is compared with cultural and personal standards for acceptability. This whole tele-effect process is swift and largely unconscious.

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