Formation of romantic relationships

Reward/Need theory
Developed by Byrne et al, it suggests that relationships will be formed if the rewards and needs of the individuals in the relationship are met. The theory is based on the principles of operant and classical conditioning. Through operant conditioning individuals who provide direct reinforcement by being supportive and helpful may be liked more. Or, individuals can be rewarded through classical conditioning by having the partner evoke pleasant feelings, which become associated with the partner. And thus, if individuals meet our needs induce positive feelings, resulting in attraction.

Filter Model or Matching hypothesis
Kerckhoff and Davis proposed the filter model, splits the formation of relationships into three distinct stages: social demographic variables, similarity of attitudes and values, psychological compatibility. When an individual does not match the criteria in each stage they are 'filtered out' until our field of desirables becomes our field of availables. Walster proposed the matching hypothesis whereby people similar in attraction; intelligence and social standing are more likely to form a relationship. 'Mismatched' couples in a relationship won’t last long.

Griffits et al study – whereby female participants were evaluated on a creative task by an examiner. After they were evaluated, participants were asked how much they ‘liked’ the experimenter, those evaluated positively (rewarding) were found to be attracted to the examiner more than those evaluated negatively. This shows that when positive emotions are evoked through positive evaluation, our attraction to the person increases (classical conditioning). → Issue of gender bias and generalisation

Gender bias: the whole model does. Lott et al found that in many cultures women are socialized to be more attractive to the needs of others (e.g. husbands + kids) rather than focusing on their own rewards.

Issue of generalisation and cultural bias: theory is developed in a Western, individualistic culture. The western ideals and values, in some cultures, people are more concerned about the needs of others and so, are less focused about their own rewards themselves. Also, in cultures arranged marriages are practiced, this model cannot be used there since there is no reward/need element.

Selfish – theory implies humans are selfish beings who only seek to maximise their own gains. Hayes et al criticised this, found individuals were more attracted or concerned with equity and fairness than rewards of needs, suggesting people are not as self-centered as the theory implies.

Reductionist – Hayes et al also suggested more complex dynamics are at work in the formation of a relationship, model is overly reductionist by over simplifying complex elements into such simple processes of operant and classical conditioning.

Deterministic – Doesn’t consider free will, presents humans as being simple stimulus response machines rather than complex individuals who may consider a range of other factors in forming a relationship rather than just evoking positive emotions and feelings.

Filter Model
One study found that individuals living on the same floor at their halls of residence at University were more likely to form a relationship because they were similar in demographic variables, thus supporting both the Filter Model and Matching hypothesis.

With regards to the second filter (similarity of attitudes), one study described 56 strangers to participants, some were more similar in attitudes than others and some were completely different. The study found that these strangers with very similar attitudes to the participants were found to be more attractive to participants, supporting both models.

Issue of generalisation and cultural bias: theory is split up the formation of relationships into three different yet very simple stages, fails to capture the dynamic and fluid nature of the formation of a relationship. Some develop faster or slower than others that the model implies.

Culturally biased – the three stages won’t necessarily apply to cultures in which arranged marriages are practiced because couples won’t go through these stages, they’re automatically put into a relationship by well wishers or parents.

Matching Hypothesis

Dance study conducted by Walster – whereby participants led to believe they were meeting dates based on matching social desirability factors. Actually though participants were matched randomly. Results showed how students matched to a physically attractive partner (regardless of their own attractiveness) were more likely to pursue further dates with their date. Thus, suggests that the level of attractiveness was the most significant factor in the matching hypothesis and intelligence or personality were relatively unimportant. This partially supports Walster. But, the issue here is that it lacks information on whether or not the students matched deemed themselves to be the same level of attractiveness or social desirability as their date, so perhaps the study lacks internal validity.

Deterministic – it fails to consider free will, simply suggesting we will be attracted to people who are similar to us, the popular saying goes “opposites attract” and perhaps it’s external factors which lead to a formation of a relationship. For instance, Hatfield found that those lacking qualities in one area may make up for it by looking for those qualities in the partner which is demonstrated by relationships consisting of an elderly wealthy male and a young attractive female or vice versa.

Over simplification of formation of relationships