

Social Life

COOPERATION



Does Kindness Trump Ability?

Our ancestors valued warmth over competence. Is it still in our best interest to do so? **By Noam Shpancer, Ph.D.**

WHEN SIZING SOMEONE up, what do you look for? What features of someone's presence factor most heavily in your judgment of them? A large body of research points to two prominent dimensions we use to make judgments of other individuals and groups. The first is *warmth*, encompassing appraisals of a person's intent and disposition, their trustworthiness and sociability. The second is *competence*, our perception of another's abilities, agency, and capability for carrying out their intents.

You can see why these two traits are critical to appraise early. Our ancestors

benefitted greatly from the ability to tell friend from foe and the ability to assess whether said friends and foes were competent or inept. Today, research finds that our appraisals of warmth and competence guide our judgment of groups and individuals in socially consequential ways—helping determine who we sympathize with and who we disdain, who we vote for and who we promote, who we admire and who we envy.

Research finds that of the two, we generally prioritize warmth over competence. In other words, when evaluating potential relationships, we tend to appraise a warm and incompetent person more positively than a cold and competent one. Why we do so hasn't been entirely understood, but a recently proposed theory may shed some light.

Why Warmth Takes the Lead

Traditionally, scholars have argued that warmth is weighted more heavily because it is more consequential to one's welfare. Whether someone *intends* to help or harm you, the argument goes, is inherently more relevant to your survival than their *ability* to do either.

This explanation, however, falters in a few ways. For one, it assumes that someone's intent shapes the outcome of their actions far more than their ability does. In practice, the result of someone's behavior is the combined product of their intentions and their capabilities. Even if your neighbor has kindly agreed to give you half of whatever he grows in his garden, his horticultural skills will be a deciding factor in how much produce you actually receive.

Evolutionary psychologists Adar Eisenbruch and Max Krasnow offer a new theory in a paper published last year in *Perspectives on Psychological Science*. They posit that among ances-

tral humans, warmth was valued more highly than competence *not* because it was inherently more important for survival but because warmth proved more predictive than competence for the future of a relationship. It's not that warmth has superior value but that it can be a relatively rare trait.

In choosing whom to collaborate with, the authors argue, our ancestors faced greater variance in potential partners' warmth than in their competence. The variability in warmth was a byproduct of our complex social organization: Unlike many other animals, we tended to live in groups with multiple men, multiple women, and a mix of kin and non-kin—creating abundant opportunities for both alliances and rivalries and collaboration as well as conflict.

While the range in competence runs only from high to low, the range of warmth runs all the way from high positive to high negative. A bad choice on warmth (i.e., inadvertently choosing a malicious partner) could have substantially worse outcomes than a good choice, while a bad choice on competence—where differences between candidates were not so wide—was likely to be less consequential.

Once in a cooperative relationship, however, a partner's competence might vary widely depending on the domain. This is in part because our ancestors tended to have domain-specific skills; some were talented hunters but struggled to make tools; others excelled at childcare but were less skilled at gathering food. And much of early humans' success, or lack thereof, was determined by a combination of ability, luck, and other factors outside their control; even the most proficient forager might struggle to find food during a drought.

Warmth, on the other hand, tends toward stability over time within a given relationship. Someone who helps you in situation A is likely to help you in situation B. Competence in area A, however, does not predict competence in area B.

Does This Still Apply Today?

This theory, then, suggests that our tendency to privilege warmth over competence was hardwired by evolution in an environment much different from our own. Yet to be answered by research, however, is whether the same calculus still makes sense today. In the modern world, vastly more complex than the one in which our ancestors lived, differences in competence may be just as large and consequential as differences in warmth within a population of potential partners—and perhaps as enduring and generalizable across domains within a relationship.

Take educational attainment. Differences in health, wealth, and longevity are vast when comparing the uneducated to their highly educated peers. The value of education tends to generalize across life domains, and the gap doesn't close over time. In today's world, picking a highly educated partner may ultimately prove more advantageous than picking a highly sympathetic one.

And as our world becomes increasingly technologically sophisticated, the gap between the digital "haves" and "have nots"—those who grow up digitally savvy compared to those who don't—widens. Like education, the digital divide can have compounding effects across time and life domains; someone who lacks technological know-how may struggle to keep up in school, find a job, maintain social connections, and advance economically in an increasingly online world.

A propensity to privilege warmth, then, may prove problematic under modern conditions—and while research is still underway, it's perhaps worth asking whether it's time to recalibrate our assessments. ■

Noam Shpancer, Ph.D., is a professor of psychology at Otterbein University and a practicing clinical psychologist in Columbus, Ohio.