Perhaps you have heard these two adages: “Birds of a feather flock together” and “Opposites attract.” The former argues that people like those who are like them, whereas the latter asserts that people prefer to affiliate with those who are not like them. So which is it? Do we like others who are like us or do we look for friends and mates that complement our qualities? Overwhelmingly, the evidence favors the power of similarity in attraction. With regard to almost all psychological and physical characteristics, people like those who are like them. Undoubtedly, this is one reason why the word *like* has two meanings: “similar to” and “fond of.”

Byrne (1961) initiated experimental research in this area. In this study, participants were led to believe they were about to meet a fellow student. The participants then received some information about the other student’s hobbies, political attitudes, background, and interests. Depending on which condition they were in, participants learned that they and the other student were very similar, somewhat similar, or not at all similar. After receiving this information, the participants indicated how much they liked the person and how much they thought they would enjoy working with the person. The two scores were combined to yield an index of interpersonal attraction. As shown in Figure 11.9, participants expressed greater liking for a student who was “just like them” than for one who was not at all like them. Along with other findings, these data establish that we like those who are like us (see also Newcomb, 1961).

Dissimilarity is also important. In a replication and extension of Byrne’s research, Rosenbaum (1986) found that differences and dissimilarities matter more to people than convergences and similarities do. Rather than liking people who are like us, Rosenbaum’s research suggested that we dislike people who are different from us. This finding led Byrne and his associates to propose that attraction is a two-step process (Byrne, Clore, & Smeaton, 1986). First, when choosing friends, dates, or spouses, we eliminate from consideration people who are too dissimilar from us. Having then reduced the potential pool of eligible people to include only those who are at least moderately similar to ourselves, we use similarity to make our final choices.