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LIFESTYLE FEATURES

Capilano Suspension Bridge is a perfect love laboratory

In the 1970s, UBC researchers used the Capilano Suspension Bridge to reveal something about the nature of sexual attraction

by Jon Azpiri *on February 9th, 2011 at 1:20 PM*

Most people think of the Capilano Suspension Bridge as a venerable landmark, the kind of place you take relatives who are visiting from out of town. For two intrepid UBC psychology postdocs back in the 1970s, the bridge was the perfect laboratory, one that helped reveal something about the nature of sexual attraction.

Don Dutton and Arthur Aron were looking to research the effect a person's physical state had on romantic attraction. The two brainstormed ideas for an experiment in a location where a distressed person might come across a person of the opposite sex. Aron suggested something involving a dentist's office. Dutton thought the 137-metre-long bridge that dangles precariously over the North Shore's Capilano River would be the perfect place to test their theories.

The study went something like this: Dutton and Aron hired an attractive woman to ask men who had just crossed the bridge to participate in a study that required them to write a brief story based on a picture. After he'd completed the task, the woman gave each man her phone number in case "he wanted to talk further." She also went to a nearby provincial park to interview men after they had crossed a sturdier bridge over the Capilano.

The researchers wanted to know what men would do with the interviewer's phone number. What they found was that nine of the 18 men who took the interviewer's phone number after crossing the suspension bridge called her, while only two of the 16 men who took her number after crossing the sturdy bridge decided to make contact. They also noted that the stories written by the men who had crossed the suspension bridge featured more sexual imagery than the ones by those who had used the less scary crossing.

Dutton and Aron believed that the increased interest in the interviewer was caused in large part by the "misattribution of arousal", a phenomenon in which people misinterpret the cause of their heightened physical state.

“You’re in this situation where you’re stirred up ambiguously and you’re looking for an explanation,” says Aron—now a psychology professor at Long Island’s Stony Brook University—in a phone interview with the *Georgia Straight*. “You look to your environment and pick the explanation that makes the most sense.”

In the case of the bridge study, the researchers believed the men attributed their increased heart rate and sweaty palms to the attractive woman rather than the fact that they had just crossed a wood-and-cable bridge suspended 70 metres above a rushing river.

Dutton and Aron’s study suggests that a small amount of stress can help spur amorous feelings.

“If you want someone to be attracted to you, you may want to arrange to do something that’s a little bit exciting or scary,” Aron says, adding that horror movies and amusement park rides could make your date think you’re responsible for his or her quickened heartbeat.

But he warns that such a date can easily backfire. Through subsequent research, he’s found that if a person finds someone unattractive, he or she will likely find that person even more unattractive after an arousing event.

“Subsequent studies have shown that if you stir someone up and they’re exposed to an unattractive person, they’re more likely to be disgusted. People think, ”˜Why am I so stirred up? Well, there’s this ugly person. I’m disgusted.’ ”

The two researchers’ study, “Some Evidence for Heightened Sexual Attraction Under Conditions of High Anxiety”, published in 1974, is considered something of a classic in psychology circles, and is regularly cited in textbooks and pop-psychology books. More important to Aron and Dutton, it has inspired plenty of subsequent studies.

One such study was conducted by Cindy Meston and Penny Frohlich of the University of Texas in 2003. The researchers went to two Texas amusement parks and showed photographs of a moderately attractive person of the opposite sex to people before and after they rode a roller coaster. They found that people rated the person in the photograph as being more attractive after the roller-coaster ride than they did before.

Sheena Iyengar, a Toronto-born professor at Columbia Business School who wrote about Dutton and Aron’s work in her recent book *The Art of Choosing*, says the Capilano Suspension Bridge study and related research illustrate how ambiguous our decision-making processes can be.

“It’s an example of how we don’t always know what we’re feeling,” Iyengar says during a phone interview from her office in New York City. “We don’t know how to interpret what we’re feeling, and that’s what makes it difficult for us to make choices. We usually think we know if we’re attracted to somebody. We think that this is very basic

sensory knowledge about ourselves. It's an interesting study that shows that we don't always know what we feel."

Iyengar notes that the implications of the study extend beyond the world of dating. People often think they're making rational decisions, but they neglect to consider how physical factors can cloud their thinking. For instance, it's often been said you should avoid going grocery shopping on an empty stomach because hunger pangs might cause you to purchase too much food, particularly junk food.

Likewise, your physical state may not lead you to make the best dating decisions. Aron notes: "One of the lessons [of the Capilano Suspension Bridge study] is that often when you feel an intense attraction to someone, you shouldn't assume it's because this is the right person for you."

Iyengar hopes that a little knowledge can help prevent us from being slaves to our physiology. "I think if people are aware of the kinds of mistakes they can make, they can use a rational process to mitigate these errors."

Crossing the Capilano Suspension Bridge on a first date may be a good idea; it may be wise to wait a bit before asking for that second date in order to let cooler heads prevail.