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Physical Attractiveness

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Physical attractiveness has been defined as: "That which represents one's conception of the ideal in appearance; that which gives the greatest degree of pleasure to the senses" (Hatfield & Sprecher, 1986, p. 4). Beginning with Darwin (1971), anthropologists have long tried to discover universal standards of attractiveness. One must know what various peoples consider sexually appealing, if one is to predict the course of sexual selection and, ultimately, human evolution. Darwin's painstaking observations finally convinced most scientists that culture sets the standard, and thus it was futile to search for universals. Any lingering hopes of identifying sweeping standards were shattered in Ford and Beach's (1951) landmark survey of more than 200 primitive societies. They, too, failed to find any universal standards of sexual allure.

Recently, however, sociobiologists have revived hopes that more sophisticated sociobiological theory and research techniques may finally enable scientists to pinpoint some aesthetic universals. In one promising study, Langlois and Roggman (1990) found evidence that the Greek's golden mean may serve as the standard of appeal. The authors assembled photographs of the faces of men and women. Using video and computer techniques, they generated a series

of composite faces (truly average men and women). They found that composites were more attractive than any individual face.

One oral and maxillofacial surgeon at UCLA Medical Center, Dr. Stephen Marquardt (2002), finds symmetry and harmony to be so critical in determining facial attractiveness that he and other facial surgeons employ a facial mask (based on a Golden Decagon Matrix) to calculate the mathematical changes that are necessary to produce a “perfect” face.

Other sociobiologists have tested the hypothesis that men and women prefer faces that, in a sense, have it all—faces that combine the innocence of childhood with the ripe sexuality of the mature. Early ethnologists observed that men and women often experience a tender rush of feeling when they view infantile “kewpie doll” faces—faces with huge eyes, tiny noses, and mouths, and little chins (Eibl-Eibesfeldt, 1971). Other authors (Symons, 1979) proposed that men and women should be aroused by faces that possess features associated with maturity, especially lush, adult sexuality (for example, thick hair, dewy skin, and full lips) or mature power (for example, high cheekbones or a firm jaw and chin). Most recent evidence finds that people like faces that possess both assets: large eyes and a small nose, full sexual lips, and a strong jaw and chin (Cunningham, Barbee, & Pike, 1990). Whether these preferences will turn out to be universal is not yet known. Historians (Banner, 1983) remind us that in any society, standards of beauty often change at a dizzying rate.

Evidence That People Are Biased in Favor of the Physically Attractive

Scientists find that most people, most of the time, are biased in their reactions to good-looking versus unattractive people. This discovery is certainly not new. The Greek philosopher Sappho contended that “what is beautiful is good.” Today’s scientists, however, have come to a little better understanding of just how, where, when, and why physical appearance is important. There seem to be four steps in the stereotyping process:

1. Most people know that it is not fair to discriminate against the unattractive (they would be incensed if others discriminated against them).
 2. Privately, most people take it for granted that attractive and unattractive people are different. Generally, they assume that what is beautiful is good and what is unattractive is bad.
 3. Most people treat good-looking and average people better than they treat the unattractive.
 4. As a consequence, a self-fulfilling prophecy occurs. The way people are treated shapes the kinds of people they become.
- (Hatfield & Sprecher, 1986, p. 36).

There is evidence that people do perceive attractive-unattractive people differently (see Hatfield & Sprecher, 1986; Bull & Ramsey, 1988; Graham & Kligman, 1985, for encyclopedic reviews of this research). In a classic experiment, researchers (Dion et al, 1972) showed college men and women yearbook photographs of men and women who varied markedly in appearance and asked them their first impressions of the students. Young adults assumed

that handsome men and beautiful women possessed nearly all the virtues. They assumed that good-looking people were more sociable, outgoing, poised, interesting, exciting, sexually responsive, kind, nurturant, modest, strong, and sensitive; and that they were warmer and had better characters than their homely peers. Good-looking people were also expected to have more fulfilling lives. Students predicted the good-looking people would be happier, have more successful marriages, find better jobs, and all-in-all, live more satisfying lives. On only one dimension were young adults suspicious of good looks; they did not expect attractive people to make especially good parents.

Observers recognize that good looks might have a bit of a dark side. For example, Dermer and Thiel (1975) asked college students to rate college women who varied greatly in attractiveness. In general, subjects assumed that attractive and average women possessed more appealing personalities and were more socially skilled than unattractive women. In this study, however, researchers also documented some ugly truths about beauty. Subjects expected attractive women to be more vain and egotistical, more bourgeois (i.e., materialistic, snobbish, and unsympathetic to oppressed peoples), and less committed to their marriages (more likely to have extramarital affairs and/or to request a divorce) than homely women. Similar results have been secured by Eagley and her colleagues (1991).

Not only do people think that the attractive are special but they treat them that way (Bull & Ramsey, 1988; Graham & Kligman, 1985; Hatfield & Sprecher, 1986). Teachers award good-looking grade school, high school, and college students with better grades than their less attractive counterparts for the same

work. Executives are more likely to hire and promote good-looking men and women and to pay them more. Clinicians spend more time with good-looking clients; they get better care and do better in therapy. Unattractive people are more likely to be judged mentally ill. Attractive law-breakers are less likely to get caught, less likely to be reported to the authorities, less likely to be found guilty, and even if convicted, are less likely to receive strict sentences. The good-looking are less likely to be asked to help others, but more likely to receive assistance if they ask for help or are in trouble. Finally, society's biases ensure that good-looking men and women have a marked advantage at every stage of an intimate relationship. The attractive have an easier time meeting potential dates and mates, attracting more appealing dates and mates, and ending up with better dating and marital relationships. They have an advantage in trying to sustain these relationships. If things go wrong, they find it easier to start anew.

There are some limits to people's preference for and biased treatment of the most attractive, of course. Some types of people seem to care more about looks than do others: traditional men and women seem to care about looks than do the less traditional and men seem to care more about other's looks than do women. People care more about looks in some situations than in others: appearance seems to matter most when people are getting acquainted; later on, other things—intelligence, personality, and so forth—become more important. Appearance matters more in romantic settings than in others.

What effect does such stereotyping have on men and women? The evidence is mixed (Bull & Ramsey, 1988; Graham & Kligman, 1985; Hatfield & Sprecher, 1986). The good looking and unattractive are not so different as people assume them to be. Self-esteem and self-concept are positively related to how good-looking people *think* they are, but not to their actual appearance. The personalities of the attractive and unattractive differ only slightly if at all. A few studies have found that the good-looking are slightly more inner-directed, more assertive, more likely to seek success, and possess more fear-of-failure than do others. Other studies have failed to replicate these results.

Attractive and unattractive people do seem to differ in one respect. The good-looking appear to be more confident in romantic and social situations and to possess more social skills. People expect the good looking to be socially appealing and treat them that way. The evidence suggests that a self-fulfilling prophecy generally operates. People expect the good looking to be charming, treat them that way, and as a consequence, they become more skilled. This self-fulfilling aspect of physical attractiveness was demonstrated in a study by Mark Snyder, Elizabeth Tanke, and Ellen Berscheid (1977). Men and women at the University of Minnesota were recruited for a study on the acquaintance process. First, men were given a Polaroid snapshot and biographical information about their partners. In fact, the snapshot was a fake; it depicted either a beautiful or a homely woman. Men were asked their first impressions of her. Those who believed they had been assigned a beautiful partner expected her to be sociable, poised, humorous, and socially skilled. Those

who thought they had been assigned to an unattractive partner expected her to be unsociable, awkward, serious, and socially inept. Such prejudice is not surprising; it is known that good-looking people make exceptionally good first impressions.

The next set of findings, however, was startling. Men were asked to get acquainted with their partners via the telephone. Male expectations had a dramatic impact on the way they talked to their partners during the telephone call. That, in turn, created a correspondingly great impact on the response of the women. Men, of course, thought they were talking to a beautiful or homely woman; in fact, the women on the other end of the line varied greatly in appearance, although most were probably average in looks. Nonetheless, within the space of a telephone conversation, women became what men expected them to be. After the telephone conversation, judges listened to tapes of the women's portion of the conversation and tried to guess what the women were like just from that conversation. Women who had been talked to as if they were beautiful, soon began to sound that way. They became unusually animated, confident, and socially skilled. Those who had been treated as if they were unattractive, soon began acting that way. They became withdrawn, lacked confidence, and seemed awkward. The men's prophecies had been fulfilled.

How did this happen? When the portions of the men's conversation were analyzed, it was found that those men who thought they were talking to a beautiful woman were more sociable, sexually warm, interesting, independent,

sexually permissive, bold, outgoing, humorous, and socially skilled than the men who thought they were talking to a homely woman. The men assigned to an attractive woman were also more comfortable, enjoyed themselves more, liked their partners more, took the initiative more often, and used their voices more effectively. In brief, the men who thought they were talking to a beautiful woman tried harder. Undoubtedly, this behavior caused the women to try harder, too. If the stereotypes held by the men became reality within the 10 minutes of a telephone conversation, one can imagine what happens when people are treated well or badly over a lifetime. In fact, researchers have found some evidence that the attractive are in fact unusually socially skilled and experienced (Curran, 1975; Kaats & Davis, 1970).

A final observation: the evidence makes it clear that the good looking have an advantage and the unattractive have a disadvantage in life. However, a careful analysis of existing data makes it clear that the emphasis should be on the latter half of this sentence. If the relationship between appearance and a host of other variables—self-esteem, happiness, job opportunities, dating and popularity—are examined, it is soon discovered that the relationship between appearance and advantage is not a monotonically decreasing one. The data make it clear that the extremely attractive have only a small advantage over their more ordinary peers. What is really important is to be at least average. The average-looking have a real advantage over the unattractive or the disfigured.

Suggested Readings

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