

# PHYSICAL ATTRACTIVENESS IN SOCIAL INTERACTION

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In 1974 when Dr. Ellen Berscheid and I reviewed the research done by social psychologists for the Berkowitz Advances in Experimental Social Psychology series, we could round up only a few dozen articles on physical attractiveness. This year, in a review of the existing literature (for a book entitled Mirror, Mirror on the Wall), Sue Sprecher and I easily retrieved more than a thousand articles. Obviously, in the last decade, social psychologists have become intensely interested in appearance and its consequences. Let us briefly highlight some of the major findings.

## DEFINITION

By physical attractiveness, we mean "That which represents one's conception of the ideal in appearance; that which gives the greatest degree of pleasure to the sense."

## REVIEW OF EXISTING LITERATURE

There is mounting evidence regarding the importance of physical appearance from the most casual to the most deeply intimate of encounters. People assume that what is beautiful is good; what is ugly is bad, and treat others accordingly. As a consequence of their different experiences, it appears that

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the good looking/ugly may develop very different personalities and characters.

**Discrimination in Educational Settings -- The Book Is Judged by Its Cover**

Teachers take it for granted that beauty and brains go together -- and they grade accordingly. Is this because good looking people are, in fact, smarter than others? Or is it simple prejudice? The evidence suggests that it is probably the latter.

Dr. Margaret Clifford, an educational psychologist, and I (Clifford and Walster [Hatfield], 1974) asked 400 fifth-grade teachers to take a look at children's academic files. Inconspicuously pasted in the corner of one of the report cards was a child's photograph. As you might expect, the photograph was a bogus one. For some of the teachers, a picture of a boy or girl who was quite attractive was used; for others, that of an exceedingly plain child. Otherwise, teachers received identical and comprehensive information about the children. The academic record revealed the student's grades in reading, language, arithmetic, social studies, science, art, music, and physical education. It reported on their attitudes and work habits. It even contained a tally of their absences during the school year.

The "insignificant" class photo had a great impact on the teachers' attitudes, in spite of the abundance of information. Teachers assumed that cute boys and girls were more intelligent than were the unattractive, that their parents were more interested in their education, and that they would be more likely to get advanced degrees. Teachers expected good-looking students to be popular as well as brainy -- they assumed they would get along unusually well with their classmates. All this, when in fact the children's records were identical! Similar results were obtained by others.<sup>1,2</sup> However, other studies<sup>3,4</sup> failed to replicate these results.

**On the Job Discrimination -- Beauty Pays**

There is considerable evidence that personnel managers and employers are more likely to hire good-looking men and women,<sup>5,6,7</sup> to pay them more, and to promote them more readily.<sup>8,9</sup>

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Robert P. Quinn<sup>10</sup> examined data from three national surveys, conducted at the University of Michigan's Survey Research Center. More than 800 men and 470 women, aged 16 and up, who were employed full time, were interviewed. Interviewers rated the person's physical appearance (Were they strikingly handsome or beautiful, good-looking, average-looking, quite plain, or homely?). Interviewers recorded exactly what participants' jobs were and how much they were paid. They found that for both men and women, physical attractiveness was tightly linked with salary and occupational prestige. The income of handsome/good-looking men was \$1,869 higher than that of plain/homely men. The income of beautiful/good-looking women was \$1,227 higher than that of their plain/homely counterparts.

Occupational prestige was measured by Duncan's Socioeconomic Status Scale.<sup>11</sup> This scale lists almost every conceivable job (on a scale of 1 to 100) according to how prestigious the occupation is thought to be. The prestige rating for good-looking men and women was around 49-50. The jobs in this range include clergymen, music teachers, floor managers, bookkeepers, photographers, student nurses, and managers of food stores. Homely men and women had jobs of lower prestige, in the 31-34 range. These jobs include housekeepers, building superintendents and managers, boilermakers, machinists, and gasoline service station managers. It is obvious that good looks pay -- in money and prestige.

### The Mad and the Bad

If you don't like the way others look, it is easy to conclude that there must be something wrong with them -- they must be "mad" or "bad."

### Beauty = Sanity

Mental health professionals are not immune to the glow cast by beauty. There is compelling evidence that social workers, psychologists, and psychiatrists respond very differently to good-looking clients than to ugly ones. Therapists spend more time with good-looking clients.<sup>12,13,14</sup> Therapists try harder with greater effects. Most good-looking patients solve their problems with unusual swiftness.<sup>15</sup>

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**Good Looks = A Friend in Court**

People believe that physical attractiveness should not be important in the courtroom. Only the defendant's actions and character should influence the jury's decision.<sup>16</sup> Yet, there is clear evidence that most people are unable to put their prejudices aside. If defendants are good-looking they are less likely to get caught in illicit activities.<sup>17</sup> If caught, they're less likely to be reported.<sup>18,19</sup> Even if the case does not come to court, judges and jurors are more likely to be lenient.<sup>18,20,21</sup>

**More Intimate Relationships**

Looks are important in every area of life and especially so in intimate encounters. Although people naturally desire the best that life has to offer, they generally end up with mates of comparable attractiveness, those who have about as much to offer overall, as they do.<sup>22</sup> Studies in the United States, Canada, Germany, and Japan find that couples generally end up dating and marrying someone who is similar to themselves in appearance.<sup>23-27</sup>

In a typical study<sup>28,29</sup> couples were observed in several natural settings -- in movie theater lines, in singles bars, and at assorted social events. A team of researchers rated the daters' looks. Not so surprisingly, it was found that most couples were remarkably similar in attractiveness. A handsome man was most likely to have a beautiful woman on his arm. A homely man was likely to be spotted buying a drink for a homely woman.

It was also found that "similarity breeds content." The more similar the couples were in physical appeal, the more delighted they seemed to be with one another, as reflected in intimate touching. Sixty percent of the couples who were similar in attractiveness were engaged in some type of touching. Only 22 percent of those couples who were mismatched were touching.

**Matching: More Complex Cases**

Of course, couples can be "well matched" in a variety of ways. For example, Jacqueline Kennedy chose Aristotle Onassis, who was not particularly good-looking, but was unusually

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bright, charming and . . . very rich. We probably all know of similar cases closer to home.

Murstein et al.<sup>30</sup> provide a description of the way such complex matching operates.

A handsome man is seen with a woman of mediocre attractiveness. "I wonder what he sees in her?" may be the quizzical question of a bystander. Quite possibly, she possesses compensating qualities such as greater intelligence, interpersonal competence, and wealth, of which the bystander knows nothing. . . .

Another case of compensatory exchange might be indicated if an aged statesman proposed marriage to a young beautiful woman. He would probably be trading his prestige and power for her physical attractiveness and youth. (pp. 3-4)

The evidence supports the contention that people do engage in such complicated balancing and counterbalancing in selecting mates. The better looking a man or woman, the more loving, kind, rich, and socially powerful a partner he or she is likely to attract.<sup>31-35</sup>

#### Beauty -- The Reality

According to the physical attractiveness stereotype, people assume "what is beautiful is good and what is ugly is bad." How does that affect men and women's social interactions? Do unattractive people have restricted social lives? Do they become less socially skilled as a consequence?

Expectations have a way of being fulfilled. If you expect someone to be a sourpuss, you tend to act in ways to elicit that behavior. If you expect someone to be a star, she will twinkle. That there is a self-fulfilling nature to the physical attractiveness stereotype was demonstrated in an intriguing study by Snyder, Tanke, and Berscheid.<sup>36</sup> Men and women at the University of Minnesota, who were unacquainted with each other, were recruited for a study on "the processes by which people become acquainted with each other." When a pair arrived, they were directed to different rooms. They had to use the telephone to become acquainted.

Before the conversation began, the man was given a snapshot of his partner, along with some biographical information.

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They were not allowed to see each other. In truth, the snapshot was not of the partner, but was of either a good-looking or a homely woman. The man was asked his initial impressions of his partner before the telephone conversation began. Men who thought they would be talking to an attractive woman expected her to be sociable, poised, humorous, and socially adept. Men who had been led to believe that their telephone partner was homely expected her to be unsociable, awkward, serious, and socially inept. Those were the men's expectations, and they do not surprise us. We already know that good-looking people receive more positive first impressions than homely ones.

What is startling is that men's expectations had a dramatic impact on the women's responses in the short space of a telephone call. Some men talked to a partner they thought was good-looking; others to someone they thought was not. In fact, the women on the other end of the line varied greatly in appearance. Some were attractive, some average, some homely. Nonetheless, the women became what men expected them to be. The men's and the women's telephone talk were separately recorded. The researchers then asked judges to listen to the women's voices and to indicate what they might be like. If men thought they were talking to a beauty, she soon sensed that, and began acting that way, too. Women who had been depicted as attractive became more animated, confident, and adept; women who had been depicted as homely acted just the opposite way. As the authors put it: "What had initially been reality in the minds of the men had now become reality in the behavior of the women with whom they had interacted." The men expected attractive women to be more sociable and indeed they became so.

What happened to transfer the reality in the minds of the men into the reality in the behavior of the women? When the men's sides of the conversations were analyzed, it was found that those who thought they were talking to a beautiful woman were more sociable, sexually warm, interesting, independent, sexually permissive, bold, outgoing, humorous, obvious, and socially adept than were men who thought they were talking to a homely woman. The men assigned to an "attractive woman" were also judged to be more comfortable, to enjoy themselves more and to use their voices more effectively. In a nutshell, the men who thought they had an attractive partner tried harder.

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If the stereotypes held by the men formed their own social reality within only ten minutes of a telephone conversation, one can imagine what happens over several years. If year after year, attractive people are given more opportunities and encouragement in social interaction than unattractive people, undoubtedly attractive and unattractive people become different social beings.

What would happen if in a similar study, the man was not initially biased and hadn't a clue as to what his partner looked like? Would the woman's real appearance shine through? In reality, do attractive men and women display more social skill over the phone? Such a study was conducted<sup>37</sup> and it was found that attractive men and women were judged by their telephone partners to be more socially skilled than unattractive men and women. The physical attractiveness stereotype is indeed very influential.

In general, researchers have concluded that attractive/homely men and women have different everyday social interactions. In one study,<sup>38</sup> freshmen (men and women) at the University of Rochester in New York kept records of their social experiences for 40 days. Not surprisingly, handsome men had more interactions, longer interactions, and with more women, than did homely men. Attractive people spent more of their interaction time conversing or partying, while less attractive people spent more time in task activities. Attractive men and women were more satisfied with their encounters with the opposite sex than were less appealing people. Over time, physically attractive people became more and more satisfied with their relationships.

Other researchers support the notion that attractive men and women have the most satisfying social interactions. Reis et al.<sup>39</sup> found that attractive people had more intimate and disclosing relationships than those who were ugly.

## APPLICATION

It has been abundantly documented that people generally perceive the good-looking to be special, treat them that way, and that as a consequence they become different from others in a variety of ways. What conclusion should we draw from this research? Perhaps not what you would expect.

I have two jobs. I am an experimental psychologist at the University of Hawaii at Manoa and a family therapist at

King Kalakaua Center. I am convinced what is needed is balance.

One should spend some time maintaining one's appearance. But not too much time. If one invests too much time in achieving and maintaining appeal, the immediate rewards may be great but the long-term sacrifices may be even greater.

Now I am aware that advice to be "moderate" is hard to accept. It is always appealing to see the world in simple terms. "What is beautiful is good." "More is better." But things are more complicated than that. Real life is lived in the gray areas: the realm of complexities, ambiguities, and half-truths. In the real world people are not perfect -- you have to appreciate them for their little corners and quibs. If you lose those, you lose your sense of humor and yourself. So it is a complex prescription we have to give.

1. One is wise to spend some time improving one's appearance. The data make it clear that people can improve their looks, and that such efforts do improve their lives.<sup>40,41</sup> Others in this volume bring that point home.
2. But only some time. There are several reasons why you don't want to spend enormous efforts becoming a great beauty.

**Problem No. 1. You could spend all your time improving yourself.**

George Masters<sup>42</sup> describes the first step in producing a beauty: Beauty is much more than hair and makeup. It is a total look . . . . Crucial to your total look of beauty is body control. If you don't have it, start working on it instantly. You can begin this very second and here's how:

. . . You start by pretending that you're naked with forty imaginary cameras shooting you from every possible angle -- up, down, front, back, sideways -- on your cheekbones, chinbone, nose, neckline, shoulderline, hipline, bosoms, stomach, thighs, arms and legs, all over, anywhere and everywhere.

The goal is to make you more conscious of yourself, to help you become aware of your body at all times, whether you're sitting, walking, standing, or bending.

What position are the cameras catching you in? Are you slouching in your chair? Straighten up. Pretend one camera is zooming in from the right side, on your

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face. Is your neck up? Others are focusing on your middle. Is your stomach in? While your neck is up and your stomach pulled in for this shot, what are you doing with your arms and legs?

While you're at it with the cameras, pay special attention to your hand movements, the way you pick up a fork or wrap your fingers around a glass. Your hand movements can add or detract immensely from your look of total beauty. You do not look at all pretty when your hands grab, clutch, slam, shuffle, or reach awkwardly. Furthermore, the way you hold or bend your wrists can cause wrinkles. (pp. 21-23)

The advice spreads from there. Masters tells us what we're allowed to eat and what we must refrain from eating, how long we must sleep, how to wash our faces, etc., etc.

After a few pages, most readers have a simple reaction: "Forget it. It's not worth it."

**Problem No. 2. An all-out effort is probably counter-productive.**

Here is Webster's definition of "beauty":

Beauty: 1. the quality attributed to whatever pleases or satisfies the senses or mind, as by line, color, form, texture, proportion, rhythmic motion, tone, etc., or by behavior, attitude, etc. 2. a thing having this quality 3. good looks 4. a very good-looking woman 5. any very attractive feature.<sup>43</sup>

A variety of factors -- self-esteem, intelligence, an exciting personality energy level, compassion as well as physical characteristics, all have an impact on how good-looking we seem to others. Ironically, if we focus too much on how we look, we are likely to neglect other critically important things, and end up impoverished in appearance, as well as spiritually, personally, and socially.

It is a fascinating commentary that those with the most power, the most influence, even those whose occupation is to advise others about beauty, such as George Masters, often care very little about their own appearance.

The same George Masters, who has built his career on making others beautiful, disregards the maintenance of illusion when it comes to his own appearance. Here is his

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description of his job interview at Saks, on Wilshire Boulevard in Los Angeles:

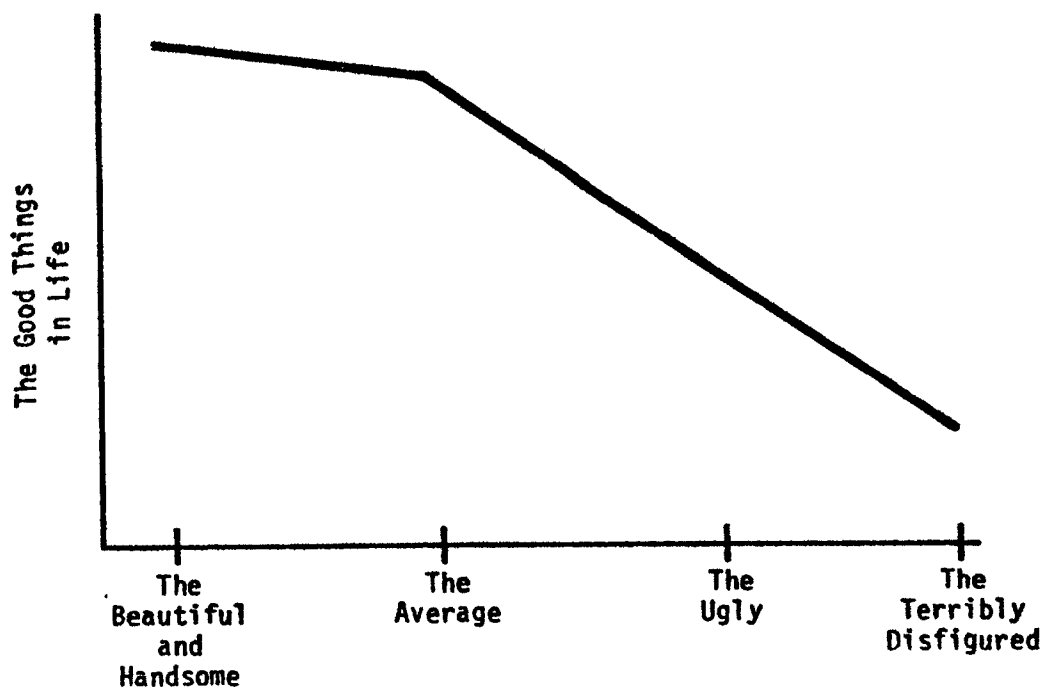
My serious offense, however, was the way I was dressed. I had been out riding and hadn't bothered to change. I was wearing Levi's, a torn shirt, and desert boots. I probably looked and smelled like a stable boy. But I was only checking in, not reporting for work (pp. 24-25).

He gets the job, however. He's a genius with hair . . . and that's all that matters.

The evidence reveals a surprising finding. Americans are so obsessed with beauty that they forget that the spectrum of appearance includes "beautiful" people . . . average-looking ones . . . ugly people . . . and people with horribly disfiguring handicaps. Early research revealed that good-looking people had an advantage over average ones who, in turn, had an advantage over homely and disfigured people. But subsequent research<sup>44</sup> makes it clear that the emphasis should be on the last half of the sentence. If we look carefully at the relationship between appearance and a host of other variables -- self-esteem, job opportunities, dating popularity, happiness -- we soon discover that things look like the relationship depicted in *Figure 5-1*. It is some small advantage to be more beautiful or handsome than average; you would gain something if through great creativity and sacrifice you became a stunning person instead of an extraordinarily ordinary one. You would gain something . . . but not much. Stunning people have only a slight advantage over their more ordinary peers. What is really important is to become at least average. The average-looking have a real advantage over the homely or the disfigured.

So, the secret hope we may all have is to become extraordinarily good-looking. That's natural. But, the data suggest that if we did, we would find, to our disappointment, that our lives would not change much.

What about those people who, in spite of their best efforts, can never succeed in overcoming serious physical handicaps? The handicapped do face special challenges and difficulties in life. Still the data make it clear that even those who are the most disfigured and handicapped have a good chance at happiness, if they can develop some of the other correlates of inner beauty -- compassion, excitement with life, etc.<sup>45</sup>



*Figure 5.1* Research shows that beautiful or handsome people have only a small advantage over average-looking people in access to the good things in life. But homely or disfigured people suffer a real disadvantage.

**Problem No. 3.**

There is a third problem in sacrificing everything in an effort to be beautiful or handsome: Extraordinarily good-looking people are likely to attract lovers who are very concerned about looks; to land jobs that are dependent on appearance.

That's fine, so long as a person is young and beautiful. But all of us inevitably have off days. Worse yet, we grow older. (See the chapters by Gerald Adams and Douglas Johnson in this volume.)

**Problem No. 4.**

There is a final problem with banking everything on beauty -- even the best is never good enough. Ravish-

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ing women and handsome men may receive attention . . . but they are targets, too. They are never good enough. ("Oh, Victoria Principal . . . she's fat. Christopher Reeves . . . he has such a chicken mouth. I never trust a man with no lips.") Even superstars admit such reviews hurt. It hurts to be nominated "Worst Dressed of 1982" or "The Most Overrated Actor of 1985" or to be named a "Non-U."

Consider these reviews:

"I am very honest," explained George Masters, Hollywood's most famous makeup man.

"There is no such thing as a natural beauty, at least for women. There are naturally beautiful men, though. I transform a pig into a raving beauty every day."

. . . Jacqueline Kennedy, he says, "Has eyes so far apart that one of them is on the other side of the room. . . ."

Marilyn Monroe, he felt, "had mannish tendencies." Mae West, "I swear she is a man."

"Liza Minnelli is a disaster. Too bad, because she's nice, but ugly. Joanne Woodward has a flat nose and Raquel Welch is silicone from the knees up."<sup>46</sup>

What is the solution then? Balance. It is worth spending some time improving your appearance . . . but not too much. The evidence suggests that you would do better spending the vast majority of your time exploring your ideas, your interests, and the little quirks of other people.

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