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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).

Artists, philosophers, and scientists have asked if there are any universal standards of beauty. In the 5th century B.C., for example, the Greek philosopher Aristotle proposed that the Golden Mean, a perfect balance, was a universal ideal.

Aristotle appears to have been right. When social scientists asked people to compare individual faces with average faces, they found people greatly preferred the latter. Researchers assembled photographs of men and women’s faces. Then, using video and computer techniques, they generated a series of composite faces. Inevitably, students found the composites to be more appealing than *any* individual face.

Evolutionary psychologists contend 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 discovered 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. Later,

sociobiologists discovered that men and women are aroused by faces that possess features associated with maturity, especially lush, adult sexuality (for example, thick hair, dewy skin, and full lips) and mature power (for example, high cheekbones or a firm jaw and chin). Recent evidence suggests that people prefer faces that possess *both* assets: large eyes and small noses, full sexual lips, and strong jaws and chins (see Rhodes & Zebrowitz, 2002). Whether these preferences will turn out to be truly universal is not yet known.

Evidence That People Are Biased in Favor of the Physically Attractive

Scientists find that most people, most of the time, are biased in favor of the good-looking. The Greek philosopher Sappho contended that “what is beautiful is good.” Today, scientists have come to a fuller 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 and unattractive people differently. In one classic experiment, social psychologists showed college students yearbook photographs of men and women who varied markedly in appearance and asked them about their first impressions of the people depicted. Young adults assumed that handsome men and beautiful women must possess nearly all the virtues. The good looking were assumed to be more sociable, outgoing, poised, interesting, exciting, sexually responsive, kind, nurturing, warm, modest, strong, and sensitive than their homely peers. They were also expected to have happier and more fulfilling lives.

Not only do people think that the attractive are special, but they also treat them that way. Clinicians spend more time with good-looking clients. Teachers reward more attractive students with better grades. Executives are more likely to hire and promote good-looking men and women and to pay them higher salaries. The good-looking are more likely to receive assistance when they are in trouble. Attractive criminals are less likely to get caught, to be reported to the authorities, to be found guilty, or receive strict sentences than are others.

Society's biases give good-looking men and women a marked advantage in intimate relationships, as well. The attractive have an easier time meeting potential dates and mates, attract more appealing dates and mates, and end up

with better dating and marital relationships. If, in spite of all these advantages, things go wrong, they find it easier to start anew.

What effect does such stereotyping have on men and women? It turns out that 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 actual appearance. In general, the personalities of the attractive and unattractive differ only slightly, if at all.

Attractive and unattractive people *do* seem to differ in one critical respect, however. The good-looking appear to be more confident in romantic and social situations and to possess more social skills than their peers. People expect the good-looking to be charming, so they treat them as if they are. As a consequence, the good-looking become more socially skilled.

This self-fulfilling aspect of physical attractiveness was demonstrated in a classic study by M. Snyder, E. Tanke, and E. 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 then asked their first impressions of this “potential date.” 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 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 a telephone call. Men's expectations had a dramatic impact on the way they talked to their partners. 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 were men who thought their partner was homely. 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, men who thought they were talking to a beautiful woman tried harder.

Within the space of a telephone conversation, women (regardless of their true appearance) became what men expected them to be. Women who were talked to as if they were beautiful soon began to sound that way. They became unusually animated, confident, and socially skilled. Those who were treated as if they were unattractive became withdrawn, lacked confidence, and seemed awkward.

The men's prophecies had been fulfilled.

A final observation: The evidence makes it clear that the good looking have an advantage. However, a careful analysis of existing data makes it clear that the relationship between appearance and advantage is not a straightforward one. The extremely attractive have only a small advantage over their more

ordinary peers. What is really important is to be at least average. Alas, it is the unattractive and the disfigured who suffer the greatest social costs of prejudice.

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