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Attractiveness is Everything

Black is Lonely
on White Campuses

Woman & Man
Feedback on Women's Liberation

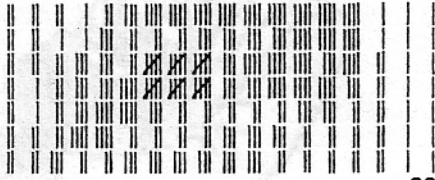
Psychology Can Now
Kick The Science Habit



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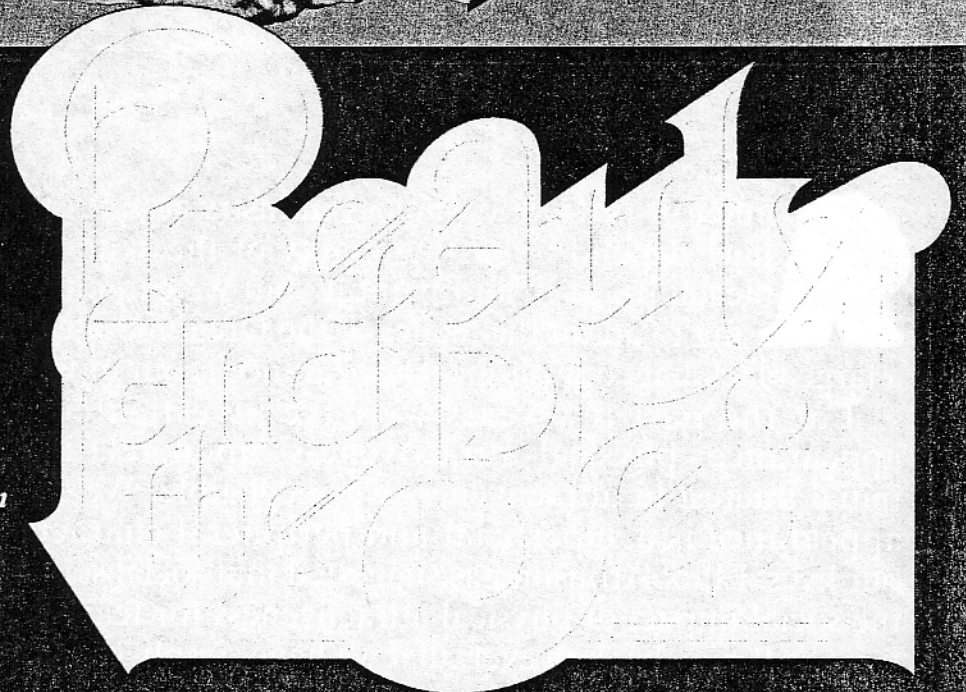


"We're all of us sentenced to solitary confinement inside our own skins, for life."

ORPHEUS DESCENDING
—TENNESSEE WILLIAMS

For all the talk about character and inner values, we assume the best about pretty people. And from grade school on, there's almost no dispute about who's beautiful.

by Ellen Berscheid
& Elaine Walster





A BILLION-DOLLAR cosmetics industry testifies that the severity of the sentence may depend upon the quality of the skin. We can cold-cream it, suntan it, bleach it, lift it, and paint it—but we cannot shed it. And, unless we are willing to adopt the tactics of the Oregon State student who enclosed himself in a large black bag, our physical appearance is our most obvious personal characteristic.

For the past few years we have investigated the impact of one aspect of appearance—physical attractiveness—upon relationships between persons. Our initial interest in attractiveness was negligible. We shared the democratic belief that appearance is a superficial and peripheral characteristic with little influence on our lives. Elliot Aronson has suggested that social scientists have avoided investigating the social impact of physical attractiveness for fear they might learn just how powerful it is. It may be, however, that we have simply given too much credence to collective

assertions that internal attributes are more important determinants of who wins or loses our affections than external appearance is.

Impact. The results of our research suggest that beauty not only has a more important impact upon our lives than we previously suspected, but its influence may begin startlingly early.

Nursery-school teachers often insist that all children are beautiful, yet they can, when they are asked, rank their pupils by appearance. The children themselves appear to behave in accordance with the adult ranking.

This finding resulted from a study of nursery-school records. Some schools collect information on how students view each other. A teacher will ask a child to select from photographs of his classmates the person he likes most and the person he likes least. The teacher also asks such questions as, *Who is teacher's pet?*, *Who is always causing trouble in the class?*, and *Who is most likely to hit other kids?*

The children in our nursery-school sample ranged in age from four to six. We thought that the older nursery-school children, who had had more time to learn the cultural stereotypes associated with appearance, might be more influenced by their classmates' attractiveness than the younger children. To examine this hypothesis, we divided the sample into two age groups. We then studied the children's reactions to their classmates who had been judged to be attractive or unattractive by adults.

We found that boys who had been judged by adults to be relatively unattractive were not as well liked by their classmates as the more attractive

boys. This was true regardless of the age of the boy. In contrast, the unattractive girls in the younger group were more popular than the attractive girls. With age, however, the unattractive girls declined in popularity, while the attractive girls gained favor with their classmates.

Fight. We also examined how the children described their classmates' behavior. We found that unattractive boys were more likely to be described by their classmates as aggressive and antisocial than were attractive boys. Children said that the less-attractive

"Beauty has more impact than we suspected. Its influence may begin startlingly early."

boys were more likely to fight a lot, hit other students, and yell at the teacher.

The nursery-school children also thought that their unattractive peers, regardless of sex, were less independent than attractive children. They were seen to be afraid, unlikely to enjoy doing things alone, and as needing help from others.

When the children were asked to name the one person in their class who scared them, they were more likely to nominate an unattractive classmate than an attractive one.

Type. The available data did not reveal whether the unattractive children actually did misbehave more than the attractive children. We do not know

if the students' opinions of their classmates were based on factual observation of the behavior, or on adherence to social stereotypes.

It is possible that physical-appearance stereotypes have already been absorbed at this early age. We know that nursery-school children can differentiate among various body types and prefer some to others. For example, fat bodies are already disliked at this age. If a child assumes that nice children are handsome and naughty ones are unattractive, he may notice only those episodes that fit this image.

Whether or not attractive and unattractive children really do behave differently, their classmates think they do and they doubtless act accordingly. Physical attractiveness thus may become a major factor in the social development of the child. It could affect his self-concept and his first social relationships.

Bias. What if the children's reports of behavioral differences are not the result of distorted perception to fit their stereotype, but are accurate descriptions of their classmates' behavior? What if unattractive nursery-school boys are indeed more aggressive and hostile than handsome boys? Research suggests that such differences might be caused by discriminatory treatment at the hands of parents, teachers and baby-sitters.

A study by Karen Dion indicates that adults

may have a stereotyped image of the moral character of attractive and unattractive children. She found that this image may affect the way adults handle a matter such as discipline for misconduct.

Dion asked young women to examine reports of disturbances created by schoolchildren. To each report she attached a paper that gave a child's name and age, and a photograph that other adults had judged to be attractive, or unattractive. The women believed that the descriptions came from teachers' journals reporting classroom and playground disturbances. Dion asked each woman to evaluate the disturbance and to estimate how the child behaved on a typical day.

Dion hypothesized that the women would interpret the same incident differently depending on whether the naughty child was attractive, or unattractive. The data supported her hypothesis. When the supposed misconduct was very mild in nature, the women did not distinguish between the everyday behavior of unattractive and attractive children. When the disturbance was severe, however, the women assumed that the unattractive boys and girls were chronically antisocial in their everyday behavior.

Cruelty. One young woman made this comment after reading about an attractive girl who had supposedly thrown rocks at a sleeping dog: "She appears to be a perfectly charming little girl, well-mannered, basically unselfish. It seems that she can adapt well among children her age and make a

good impression She plays well with everyone, but like anyone else, a bad day can occur. Her cruelty . . . need not be taken too seriously."

When a less-attractive girl committed the identical act, another young woman concluded: "I think the child would be quite bratty and would be a problem to teachers. . . . She would probably try to pick a fight with other children her own age. . . . She would be a brat at home. . . . All in all, she would be a real problem."

To a significant degree, the young women expressed the ominous expect-

"Physical attractiveness may even influence which students make the honor roll."

tation that the unattractive child would be more likely to commit a similar disturbance in the future. To a lesser, nonsignificant degree the women suspected the unattractive child of having misbehaved in the past.

Who. These findings suggest that in cases in which there is some question about who started the classroom disturbance, who broke the vase, or who stole the money (and with children it always seems that there is the question of *who did it?*) adults are likely to identify an unattractive child as the culprit. The women in Dion's study also believed that unattractive children were characteristically more dishonest than their attractive classmates.

Thus, if an unattractive child protests his innocence, his pleas may fall on deaf ears. The long march to the principal's office starts early, and physical unattractiveness may be a silent

companion for the marcher. Often the only possible justice is blind justice.

Grades. Contrary to the popular belief that "beauty and brains don't mix," there is evidence that physical attractiveness may even influence which students make the honor roll. In collaboration with Margaret Clifford, we asked 400 fifth-grade teachers to examine a child's report card. The report card itemized the student's absences during the school year, his grades (for six grade periods) in reading, language, arithmetic, social studies, science, art, music, and physical education. It also reported his performance in healthful living, his personal development, and his work habits and attitudes.

Pasted in the corner of the report card was a photograph of a child, one of six boys and girls who previously had been judged to be relatively attractive, or one of six boys and girls judged to be less attractive.

Future. We asked the teachers to evaluate the student's I.Q., his parents' attitudes toward school, his future educational accomplishment, and his social status with his peers. We predicted that the child's appearance would influence the teacher's evaluation of the child's intellectual potential, despite the fact that the report cards were identical in content. It did.

The teachers assumed that the attractive girl or boy had a higher I.Q., would go to college, and that his parents were more interested in his education. Teachers also assumed that the attractive student related to his or her classmates better than did the unattractive student.

Prophecy. Other researchers have shown that a student is likely to behave in the way a teacher expects him to behave.
Robert Rosen-

thal and Lenore Jacobson gave an I.Q. test to students in grades one through six. They told teachers that the test identified children who were likely to show marked intellectual improvement within the year. The researchers then, at random, chose 20 percent of the children and announced that test scores had identified these children as the special students.

A year later, Rosenthal and Jacobson gave the same I.Q. test to the same children—all of them. The results of the second test revealed that the supposed bloomers showed more improvement in I.Q. than the other youngsters did. The gains were most pronounced for first- and second-graders. Rosenthal and Jacobson speculated that teachers probably were more encouraging and friendly toward those children identified as bloomers. Their expectations acted as a self-fulfilling prophecy.

These studies suggest that physical attractiveness in young children may result in adult evaluations that elicit special attention. In turn, special attention may confirm teacher predictions of individual accomplishment.

Dating. The preceding findings, which indicate that a child's physical attractiveness may affect a variety of his early social and educational experiences, were somewhat unexpected. That beauty affects one's social relationships during the adolescent dating years comes as less of a surprise. What is disconcerting, however, is the apparently overwhelming importance of appearance in opposite-sex dating.

Physical attractiveness may be the single most important factor in determining popularity among college-age adults. In a series of studies of blind dates, we found that the more physically attractive the date, the more he or she was liked. We failed to find additional factors that might predict how well a person would be liked. Students with exceptional personality features or intelligence levels were not liked more than individuals who were less well endowed.

Match. In these studies of the factors that influence courtship, we tested the hypothesis that persons of similar levels of social desirability tend to pair off in courtship and marriage. Erving Goffman described this matching process in 1952: "A proposal of marriage in our society tends to be a way in which a man sums up his social attributes and suggests to a woman that hers are not so much better as to pre-

clude a merger or a partnership in these matters." To test the matching hypothesis we sponsored a computer dance for college students. We obtained a rough estimate of each student's social attributes from scores on personality, social skill, and intelligence tests. In addition, we rated each student's physical appearance at the time he or she purchased a ticket.

The participants assumed that the computer would select their dates on the basis of shared interests. But we paired the students on a random basis, with only one restriction—the cardinal

"Physical attractiveness may be the single most important factor in determining popularity among college-age adults."

rule of dating that the man be taller than the woman.

Gap. At intermission we handed out a questionnaire to determine how the students liked their dates. If the matching hypothesis is true, we would expect that students paired with dates from their own levels of social desirability would like each other more than those paired with dates from levels inferior or superior to their own. The results did not confirm the hypothesis. The most important determinant of how much each person liked his or her date, how much he or she wanted to see the partner again, and (it was determined later) how often the men actually did ask their computer partners for subsequent dates, was simply how attractive the date was. Blind dates seem to be blind to everything but appearance.

Subsequent blind-date studies, however, did provide some support for the hypothesis that persons of similar social-desirability levels pair off. Although a person strongly prefers a date who is physically attractive, within this general tendency he or she does seek a person who is closer to his or her own attractiveness, rather than a person who is a great deal more or less attractive. Apparently, even in affairs of the heart, a person is aware of a credibility gap.

We thought at first that the blind-

date studies had exaggerated the importance of physical attractiveness as a determinant of popularity for, after all, blind-date situations do not allow the dates much opportunity to get to know one another. Subsequent evidence indicated, however, that the importance of beauty probably had not been exaggerated.

In one study, for example, Polaroid pictures of a sample of college girls were rated for attractiveness. This rough index of each girl's beauty was compared to each girl's report of the number of dates she had had within the past year. We found an unexpectedly high correlation (+.61) between physical attractiveness and the woman's actual social experience. The girls in our sample represented a wide range of personality traits, social skills, intelligence, values and opinions, differences in inclination to date, and so on. Although in natural settings men do have the opportunity to know and appreciate such characteristics, physical attractiveness still had a major bearing on popularity.

Vulgarity. These findings contradict the self-reports of college students. A multitude of studies have asked students to list the characteristics they find most desirable in a date or mate ["Is It True What They Say About Harvard Boys?," *PT*, January]. Males almost always value physical attractiveness more than women, but both sexes claim that it is less important than such sterling characteristics as intelligence, friendliness and sincerity. What accounts for the discrepancy between the reality and the self-report? Many students seem to believe that it is vulgar to judge others by appearance. They prefer to use such attributes as "soul" or warmth as bases for affection. Their apparent disregard for grooming seems to support their charge that it is only to members of the over-30 crowd that appearance matters.

Traits. Young adults may not be as inconsistent as it appears at first glance. There is evidence that students may prefer physically attractive individuals because they unconsciously associate certain positive personality traits (traits which they value) with an attractive appearance. In a study conducted with Dion, we found that students thought good-looking persons were generally more sensitive, kind, interesting, strong, poised, modest, sociable, outgoing and exciting than less-attractive persons. Students also agreed that

(Continued on page 74.)

beautiful persons are more sexually warm and responsive than unattractive persons.

Lure. In addition to estimating the personality characteristics of attractive and unattractive persons, we asked the students to tell us what lay ahead for each individual. They expected that attractive persons would hold better jobs, have more successful marriages and happier and more fulfilling lives in general than less-attractive persons. They reversed their optimism on only one dimension—they did not believe that attractive individuals made better parents than did unattractive ones.

These findings suggest a possible reason for our nearly obsessive pursuit of suitably attractive mates. If we believe that a beautiful person embodies an ideal personality, and that he or she is likely to garner all the world's material benefits and happiness, the substantial lure of beauty is not surprising.

Sex. Is there any truth to these stereotypes? Is it true that attractive persons have better personalities or more successful marriages? It does seem possible that an attractive woman might have a happier marriage than a less-attractive woman. A beautiful woman has a wider range of social activity and consequently has a better chance of meeting a man who has similar interests and values—or any of the factors that appear to lead to stability in marriage.

It also seems possible that physically attractive women are in fact more responsive sexually than less-attractive females. Gilbert Kaats and Keith E. Davis found that good-looking college women were in love more often and had more noncoital sexual experience than girls of medium or low physical attractiveness. They also were more likely to have had sexual intercourse than girls of medium attractiveness. In almost any area of human endeavor, practice makes perfect. It may well be that beautiful women are indeed sexually warmer—not because of any innate difference—but simply because of wider experience.

Reversal. Do attractive coeds actually end up leading happier, more fulfilling lives than less-attractive coeds? We examined interview data taken from women now in their late 40s and early 50s. We were able to locate early pictures of most of the women by looking through their college yearbooks. A panel of judges from a group of the same age (who presumably were familiar with the standards of beauty that

prevailed 25 years ago) rated the pictures. We found that the physical attractiveness of each woman in her early 20s bears a faint but significant relationship to some of the life experiences she reports over two decades later.

Good looks in college seemed to have significant effect on marital adjustment and occupational satisfaction in older women, but the effect was exactly the opposite of what we expected. The more attractive the woman had been in college, the less satisfied, the less happy, and the less well-adjusted she was 25 years later.

Clifford Kirkpatrick and John Cot-

“The more attractive the woman had been in college, the less satisfied, the less happy, and the less well-adjusted she was 25 years later.”

ton have suggested why things do not go well with beautiful-but-aging women: “Husbands may feel betrayed and disillusioned in various ways and even disgusted with the reliance on charms which have faded with the passing of years.” They neglect to mention how aging wives will feel about their once-handsome husbands.

Criterion. Love at first sight is the basis of song and story, but usually we get around to taking a second look. It is possible that time lessens the influence of our stereotyped images of beautiful persons. However, many of our interactions with other persons are once-only, or infrequent. We have limited exposure to job applicants, defendants in jury trials, and political candidates, yet on the basis of initial impressions we make decisions that affect their lives. In the case of political candidates, our decisions also affect our lives.

Our research indicates that physical attractiveness is a crucial standard by which we form our first impressions. There is reason to believe that Richard Nixon lost his first campaign for President at least in part because he did not have a good make-up man, while John Kennedy did not need one. Public figures eventually have to act, however, and handsome is not always

as handsome does. Mayor John Lindsay may well have been the most beautiful man in New York, but that apparently didn't solve the problems of subway travel, traffic, crime, or any of the other ills that bedevil New Yorkers.

Beholder. Our research has shown some of the ways we react to attractive persons. We still do not know what variables affect our perception of beauty. If we think that a person has a beautiful personality, do we also see him or her as physically more attractive than we ordinarily would? One study suggests that this may be so. Students took part in discussion groups with other students whose political views ranged from radical to conservative. We later asked the students to judge the physical attractiveness of the group members. We found that students thought that the persons who shared their political views were more physically attractive than those who didn't. Perhaps Republicans no longer think that John Lindsay is as beautiful, now that he is a Democrat.

We should point out that in each study we conducted, we used photographs drawn from relatively homogeneous socioeconomic samples, principally from the middle class. We excluded individuals of exceptional physical beauty and those of unusual unattractiveness, as well as those with noticeable physical handicaps or eyeglasses. Had we included the full range of beauty and ugliness it is possible that the effects of physical attractiveness would have been even more dramatic.

Health. Our research also does not tell us the source of our stereotyped images of beautiful persons. It seems possible that in earlier times physical attractiveness was positively related to physical health. Perhaps it still is. It might be the instinctive nature of any species to want to associate and mate with those who are the healthiest of that species. We may be responding to a biological anachronism, left over from a more primitive age.

Although social scientists have been slow to recognize the implications of our billion-dollar cosmetics industry, manufacturers may be quicker to capitalize upon the additional exploitation possibilities of beauty from early childhood through the adult years. Such exploitation could pour even more of our gross national product into the modification of the skins in which we are all confined—some of us more unhappily than others. □