SOMATIC ATTRACTIVENESS: AS IN OTHER THINGS, MODERATION IS BEST

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Much evidence exists that facially attractive persons are perceived to possess more positive personality traits than are facially unattractive persons. This stereotype is known to be more potent when applied to women than to men. Two experiments were conducted to investigate whether a similar physical attractiveness stereotype exists when "attractive" is defined in terms of physique and "positive" is defined in terms of sex role characteristics and future life happiness. Both the sex role and the life happiness items revealed a tendency for those of intermediate attractiveness to be rated highest. In terms of somatic beauty, the results indicate that while a physical attractiveness stereotype exists, its content is not compatible with the thesis that "what is beautiful is good."

It has long been believed that personality is revealed by physical appearance. Research indicates that clear and consistent stereotypes are held by most people concerning the type of personality that is possessed by people who differ in facial attractiveness (e.g., Dion, Berscheid, & Walster, 1972) and in body build (e.g., Lerner & Korn, 1972).

Since a person's facial appearance is one of the most obvious characteristics on which others can base impressions, it is not surprising that the mere fact that we are physically attractive or unattractive may lead others to make certain assumptions about us. A study by Dion et al. (1972) confirmed the "what is beautiful is good" hypothesis. Physically attractive persons, as presented in waist-up photographs, were not only assumed to have more socially desirable personality traits but were also expected to be more successful and happy socially, professionally, and maritally than less attractive stimulus persons.
Dermer and Thiel (1975) attempted to replicate the Dion et al. person perception study, but in doing they explored a number of new dimensions. They too found that facially attractive stimulus persons were expected to possess more socially desirable personalities and to experience greater social and professional happiness than were facially unattractive stimulus persons. Not all the attributions, however, were congruent with the "what is beautiful is good" stereotype. Very attractive targets, in comparison to unattractive ones, were expected to be more vain, egotistical, materialistic, and snobbish.

While considerable work has also been conducted on the personality assumptions people make about persons differing in physique, it has focused primarily on the male body, particularly on the male with a muscular body and how he differs from the male with a less muscular body. For example, evidence exists that muscular men are viewed more positively by both men (Dibiase & Hjelle, 1968) and women (Lerner, 1969), and it has been suggested that muscular men may enjoy a social advantage over thin and fat men because of the more positive stereotype people have of them (Nichols, 1975). Studies on children and young adolescents by Lerner and his associates (Lerner, 1972, Lerner & Korn, 1972, Lerner, Karabenick, & Meislik, 1975) indicate that at all age levels a predominantly favorable view is held of those persons who possess desirable physiques.

There appears to be abundant evidence that most people have stereotyped notions about the personality traits possessed by persons of varying attractiveness, particularly facial attractiveness. Attractive people are perceived more positively than unattractive people. There is also limited evidence that these attributions contain elements of sex role stereotypes and several studies have attempted to establish a relationship between sex role stereotyping and facial attractiveness. In a review of this literature, Bar-Tal and Saxe (1976) concluded that men perceive facially attractive women as possessing more desirable qualities than facially unattractive women, however, facial attractiveness does not seem to exert the same influence on women's perceptions of men. There have been few studies on this topic, however, particularly studies concerned with physique. Since research had previously shown that male physique can influence women's perceptions of personality (Lerner, 1969), it has been suggested that a parallel exists between physique in men and facial attractiveness in women (Montemayer, 1978).

Is the "what is beautiful is good" thesis applicable when "beautiful" is defined in terms of physique and "good" is defined in terms of socially desirable sex role characteristics? The present study was an attempt to answer this question. Specifically, it was designed to investigate (a) whether stimulus persons, both male and female, who have physically attractive physiques are assumed to possess more socially desirable sex role stereotyped characteristics than stimulus persons who have less attractive physiques and (b) whether physically attractive stimulus persons are expected to lead comparatively happier lives (socially, occupationally, etc.)
Somatic Attractiveness

EXPERIMENT 1

Method

Subjects Subjects were 41 female and 35 male students aged 18 to 21, enrolled in Introductory Psychology courses, who volunteered to participate in this study in partial fulfillment of a course requirement. The subjects of each sex were equivalent in age and class standing.

Materials Target stimuli were six sketches, three of the female body and three of the male body all clothed in bathing suits. These figure drawings were selected from a larger sample of sketches in a preliminary study. Based on high interjudge agreement (> 95%), the sketches were deemed to represent high, intermediate, and low attractiveness categories. On all drawings, the head was left blank in order to minimize responses to cues other than body build.

All subjects responded to a shortened version of the Sex-Role Stereotype Questionnaire developed by Rosenkrantz, Vogel, Bee Broverman, and Broverman in 1968 and modified by Broverman, Broverman, Clarkson, Rosenkrantz, and Vogel in 1970. Only the 38 items which were previously shown to differentiate men from women in a stereotypic way were utilized in the present study. Each item consists of short trait descriptions made up of two words opposite in nature, one designed to portray the male stereotype and the other the female stereotype. Of the 38 items, 27 are male-valued (the masculine pole is regarded as the more socially desirable) and 11 are female-valued. In addition to the 38 sex-role stereotyped items, four items, similar to those used by Dion et al. (1972), were included to assess expected life happiness.

Subjects were presented with sketches of six stimulus persons who varied in somatic attractiveness, and were asked to assess them on the 42-item questionnaire. Half of the subjects did this for the sketches of the three female figures first, followed by the sketches of the three male figures. The remaining half received the stimuli in the reverse order.

As in the Dion et al. study, subjects were asked to indicate which stimulus person possessed the “most” and “least” of each trait. The stimulus person of each sex thought to best represent the valued pole (whether masculine or feminine) was assigned a score of 3, the stimulus person thought to possess an intermediate amount was assigned a score of 2, and the stimulus person thought to least represent the valued pole was assigned a score of 1. The subjects’ ratings of each stimulus person were averaged across the 27 male-valued items and across the 11 female-valued items. Thus, 12 scores were generated for each subject—average rating on male-valued items and average rating on female-valued items for each of the six stimulus persons.

1 Copies of the stimulus figures may be obtained from the author upon request.
Subjects were also asked to indicate, for each set of sketches, the stimulus person "most" and "least" likely to experience marital happiness, parental happiness, social happiness, and occupational happiness. The stimulus person expected to experience the most happiness was assigned a score of 3, the stimulus person expected to experience an intermediate amount of happiness was assigned a score of 2, and the stimulus person expected to experience the least happiness was assigned a score of 1.

Design The design is a $2 \times 2 \times 2 \times 3$ analysis of variance. Manipulated characteristics of the stimulus person were sex (male or female) and level of attractiveness, (high, medium, or low) Subject characteristic was sex (male or female) and item characteristic was the socially desirable pole (male-valued or female-valued).

Data from the four items concerning expected happiness were analyzed separately by means of Freedman two-way analyses of variance.

Results and Discussion

The analysis of variance yielded no significant main effect for Sex of Subject, $F(1, 74) = 1.81, p > .05$, or for Sex of Stimulus, $F(1, 74), p > .05$ A main effect for Attractiveness Level of Stimuli was observed, $F(2, 148) = 30.84, p < .001$. The significance of this effect, however, needs to be interpreted in light of two significant interactions Value of Item $\times$ Attractiveness Level, $F(2, 148) = 84.50, p < .001$, and Sex of Subject $\times$ Value of Item $\times$ Attractiveness Level, $F(2, 148) = 9.42, p < .001$. As seen in Figure 1, the Value of Item $\times$ Attractiveness Level interaction is similar for male and female subjects Trend analyses on the male-valued items yielded a significant linear component for both male subjects ($F = 97.25, p < .01$) and female subjects ($F = 369.00, p < .01$). The quadratic regression component was not significant for either sex. For female-valued items, both the linear component (male subjects $F = 5.92, p < .05$, female subjects $F = 38.43, p < .01$) and the quadratic component (male subjects $F = 17.83, p < .01$, female subjects $F = 58.86, p < .01$) were significant. Because of the larger quadratic component, it may be concluded that the relationship for female-valued items is represented more appropriately by a curvilinear regression line.

In summary, the results bearing on the question of whether physically attractive stimulus persons are assumed to possess more socially desirable characteristics are equivocal. Highly attractive stimulus persons are assumed to possess the most male-valued characteristics and the least female-valued characteristics. Overall, the data appear to support the notion that it is best to be moderately attractive, at least in terms of attribution favorability.

This conclusion is supported by the results of the life happiness items (see
Table 1) With one exception, social happiness, the data are not consistent with the "what is beautiful is good" thesis. In general, moderately attractive stimulus persons were expected to experience the most life happiness.

Consistent with the findings of Dion et al. (1972), moderately attractive persons were rated somewhat higher on parental happiness, although no statistically significant differences were apparent.

Except for female subjects' ratings of female stimuli, the greatest occupational happiness was attributed to the moderately attractive stimuli. Both Dion et al. and Dermer and Thiel (1975) found that highly attractive persons were expected to attain the highest occupational status. The present results suggest that these highly attractive persons are not expected to be as happy in their more prestigious jobs as more moderately attractive persons are in their less prestigious jobs. Of course, the divergence in results could be due to the fact that the earlier studies manipulated facial attractiveness whereas the present study varied somatic attractiveness.

Subjects attributed the greatest chance for marital happiness to the moderately attractive stimulus, but only for members of the opposite sex. Perhaps
Table 1
Sums of scores and Freedman analyses of variance for life happiness items

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Female Stimuli</th>
<th>Male Stimuli</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Male Subjects&lt;sup&gt;a&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>Female Subjects&lt;sup&gt;b&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>Male Subjects&lt;sup&gt;c&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>Female Subjects&lt;sup&gt;b&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
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<td>Attractiveness</td>
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<td></td>
<td>High</td>
<td>Medium</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>X&lt;sup&gt;r&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>Medium</td>
<td>Low</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marital happiness</td>
<td>69</td>
<td>81</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>6.34*</td>
<td>82</td>
<td>86</td>
<td>78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parental happiness</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>74</td>
<td>74</td>
<td>2.74</td>
<td>78</td>
<td>88</td>
<td>80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social happiness</td>
<td>94</td>
<td>67</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>29.31**</td>
<td>111</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Occupational happiness</td>
<td>67</td>
<td>83</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>7.94*</td>
<td>91</td>
<td>91</td>
<td>64</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<sup>a</sup>N = 35
<sup>b</sup>N = 41
<sup>*</sup>p < .05
<sup>**</sup>p < .01
Dermer and Thiel's finding that attractive persons were expected to be more likely to engage in adultery is relevant here. Somatic beauty seems not to be considered an advantage in gaining life happiness, except for social happiness. Moderately attractive individuals, perhaps because they are not affected by the negative attributions for beauty nor by the detriments of unattractiveness (see Dermer & Thiel, 1975), are expected to experience more life happiness.

**EXPERIMENT 2**

While the results of the first study are quite intriguing, the experimental design could be criticized on several counts. (1) Because sex of the stimulus person and attractiveness of the stimulus person were both manipulated within subjects, the study becomes vulnerable to a demand characteristics critique. A within subjects design was chosen in order to make the procedure analogous to that used by Dion et al. (1972). In such a design, however, it is relatively easy for subjects to infer the purpose of the study. (2) A second limitation is the use of a single stimulus person to represent each level of attractiveness. Any one drawing might possess special characteristics unrelated to the independent variable, and these characteristics could have affected responding. (3) The use of faceless sketches lacks ecological validity. The obtained results, therefore, may not be generalizable to more "real" stimuli.

These methodological deficiencies leave the findings of the first study open to alternative interpretations. Therefore, doubt may be cast on the conclusion that, in terms of attribution favorability, moderation appears superior to abundance. For this reason, a portion of the study was replicated using a design that eliminates the previously mentioned methodological weaknesses.

**Method**

**Subjects** Subjects were 81 female and 81 male students enrolled in undergraduate psychology courses. The students volunteered to participate in this study.

**Materials** Target stimuli were nine black and white photographs of females clothed in bathing suits. These photographs were selected from a large sample of photographs in a preliminary study. Based on high interjudge agreement (> 88%), the high, moderate, and low attractiveness categories were each represented by three photographs. The head was cut off of all photographs in order to minimize responses to cues other than body build.

As in the first experiment, all subjects responded to the shortened version.
of the Sex-Role Stereotype Questionnaire. In this study, the poles of each item were separated by a seven-point rating scale. Subjects were presented with one of the nine photographs and were asked to rate the stimulus person on each of the 38 items.

**Design** The design is a $2 \times 3$ analysis of variance (sex of subject $\times$ attractiveness level). Separate analyses were performed on male-valued and female-valued items. Nine subjects of each sex rated each of the nine photographs, thus, 27 subjects served in each of the six cells of the design.

**Results**

**Manipulation checks** (1) Attractiveness level. After completing their questionnaires, 60 subjects were asked to rate on a 10-point scale the attractiveness level of their stimulus person. No significant differences were found between the ratings of the three stimuli within each attractiveness category, while significant differences were found in mean ratings between categories (High = 8.95, Moderate = 6.57, Low = 1.85). (2) Equivalence. Since the ratings of the three stimuli within a category were collapsed, it could be proposed that the stimuli, while similar in attractiveness level, might still elicit different ratings. In none of the attractiveness levels did the three stimuli elicit differential ratings on male-valued items, as tested by $t$-tests ($p > .05$). One of the stimuli utilized in the moderately attractive condition, however, did elicit comparatively deflated ratings on female-valued items ($p < .05$). Overall, however, the effects of the specific stimuli on responding can be regarded as slight.

The subjects' ratings of the stimulus person were summed across the male-valued and female-valued items. For male-valued items, subjects' scores could thus range from 27 to 189, for female-valued items, the scores could range from 12 to 84. Means and standard deviations are presented in Table 2. Neither analysis of variance yielded a significant main effect due to sex of the subject (male-valued $F(1, 156) = 0.13, p > .05$, female-valued $F(1, 156) = 0.00, p > .05$) nor a significant interaction effect (male-valued $F(2, 156) = 0.90, p > .05$, female-valued $F(2, 156) = 0.94, p > .05$). Both analyses did yield significant main effects due to attractiveness level (male-valued $F(2, 156) = 116.08, p < .01$, female-valued $F(2, 156) = 3.11, p < .05$). In neither instance were more desirable traits attributed to the highly attractive stimulus person than to the moderately attractive person. Inspection of Table 2 reveals that for both male-valued and female-valued items, highly attractive and moderately attractive persons are rated very similarly and each is rated higher than low attractive persons. Trend analyses on the male-valued items yielded both a significant linear component (male subjects $F = 60.65, p < .01$, female subjects $F = 89.16, p < .01$) and a significant
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sex of Subject</th>
<th>Attractiveness Level</th>
<th>Male-Valued Items</th>
<th>Female-Valued Items</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>High</td>
<td>Moderate</td>
<td>Low</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Mean</td>
<td>S D</td>
<td>Mean</td>
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<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>120 00</td>
<td>12 9</td>
<td>122 78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>116 89</td>
<td>14 8</td>
<td>126 52</td>
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<tr>
<td>Column mean</td>
<td>118 4</td>
<td>124 6</td>
<td>82 6</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
quadratic component (male subjects $F = 26.97, p < .01$, female subjects $= 70.13, p < .01$) For female-valued items, the linear component was significant for male subjects ($F = 5.59, p < .05$) but not for female subjects. The quadratic component was not significant for either sex.

Discussion

While neither experiment supported a "what is beautiful is good" thesis, differences in results were observed. These differences may be partially attributable to the methodological weaknesses of the initial experiment. One disparity between the two studies occurred in the female-valued items; a significant quadratic regression component was found in Experiment 1 but not in Experiment 2. The fact that one of the moderately attractive stimuli utilized in Experiment 2 elicited comparatively deflated ratings may be a partial reason why the curvilinear relationship between attractiveness level and attribution of female-valued traits found in Experiment 1 was not replicated in Experiment 2.

Another discrepancy between the two studies occurred in the male-valued items. Experiment 1 found the more socially desirable characteristics to be attributed to the highly attractive stimulus person while Experiment 2 found the moderately attractive persons to be rated highest. It is possible that the attractiveness levels represented in each experiment were not equivalent. Several individuals who viewed both sets of stimuli remarked that the highly attractive stimulus person in Experiment 1 more nearly resembled the moderately attractive stimulus persons in Experiment 2. If this is the case, the discrepancy in results disappears. Obviously further research utilizing increased numbers of attractiveness levels and diverse kinds of target materials are needed in order to clarify this issue.

Conclusion

The results of the two experiments indicate that, in general, persons with moderately attractive physiques, in comparison to persons with more or less attractive physiques, are assumed to possess more socially desirable characteristics and to experience more life happiness. While a physical attractiveness stereotype seems to exist for physique, its content appears not to be compatible with the thesis that "what is beautiful is good." Instead, with somatic beauty as with may other things, it seems best to follow Plutarch's advice "Moderation is best, and avoid all extremes."

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