

Topic 1.



The images above are composites of undergraduate female faces that were judged particularly attractive (left image) and relatively unattractive (right). Surprisingly, there is high agreement among individuals about what types of faces they consider attractive and what faces they consider unattractive - even when they are from very different cultures. Furthermore, facial attractiveness influences many important social outcomes: we prefer to date, employ and even vote for individuals with attractive faces.

Introduction to attractiveness research

Why study physical attractiveness?

Physical attractiveness influences many different aspects of human social interaction. For example, people preferentially mate with, date, associate with, employ, and even vote for physically attractive individuals. People also tend to automatically ascribe positive personality characteristics to physically attractive individuals. This is often referred to as the 'attractiveness halo effect' or 'beauty is good stereotype'. Although both males and females claim in self-report (i.e. when answering questionnaires) that physical attractiveness is not of primary importance when choosing a partner, the single best predictor of satisfaction with a 'blind date' is facial attractiveness for both men and women.

Furthermore, the physical attractiveness of misbehaving children and individuals appearing in court on charges such as burglary and fraud has been found to influence others' per-

ceptions of the seriousness of their misdemeanours. Intriguingly, attractiveness counts against fraudsters when juries pass sentence, while attractiveness reduces the perceived seriousness of the crime of burglary. The influence of physical attractiveness is even apparent in aspects of human social interaction as fundamental as the bonding between mothers and infants or the level of care nurses provide for premature-born infants: mothers bond more readily with attractive children and attractive premature infants receive more care (and therefore recover faster) than their relatively unattractive counterparts. As physical attractiveness is important for many aspects of everyday life many studies have investigated what physical characteristics are considered to be attractive.

Why study facial attractiveness?

Although the attractiveness of bodies has also been investigated, most experimental re-

search has focused on identifying attractive facial characteristics. This emphasis on the study of facial attractiveness is consistent with the claims that the face plays a central role in human social interactions (e.g. expressions communicate an individual's emotional state) and is more important for judgements of the attractiveness of the 'whole person' (i.e. the face and body presented together) than body attractiveness. For example, for women, a youthful facial appearance appears to be more important for their overall attractiveness than a youthful body shape. The ability to process faces emerges very early in infancy and develops earlier than the ability to process bodies. These findings suggest processing faces is particularly important.

Agreement and Attractiveness

One of the more striking findings concerning facial attractiveness is that even very young infants prefer to look at faces adults consider attractive. In other words, infants appear to prefer the same types of faces as adults do. Furthermore, it has been shown that people from very different cultures are attracted to the same types of faces. This high agreement among individuals of different ages and from different cultures suggests attractiveness judgements are not arbitrary but have a 'biological basis'. By this we mean that there is something fundamental about our biological makeup that influences the types of faces that we find attractive.

Further Reading

Langlois, J. H., Kalakanis, L., Rubenstein, A. J., Larson, A., Hallam, M. & Smoot, M. 2000 Maxims or myths of beauty? A meta-analytic and theoretical review. *Psychological Bulletin*, **126**, 390–423.