

Facial attractiveness in men provides clues to semen quality

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Abstract

Facial attractiveness has been related to health in both men and women. Certain psychological, physiological, and secondary sex characteristics have been used as accurate markers of hormonal and developmental health. The main objective of this study was to investigate the capacity of women to select males of high reproductive quality based on their facial attractiveness. A total of 66 males were included in the study. Each of them provides a semen sample, and frontal and lateral photographs were taken. Semen analysis was made according to standard WHO (1999) guidelines for morphology, motility, and concentration. Moreover, a Sperm Index (SI) was calculated as the principal component of these parameters. In Study 1, 66 women rated the attractiveness, as a possible permanent couple, of pictures of all 66 men. In Study 2, the pictures of a subset of 12 males were randomly selected from three semen quality subgroups (terciles named good, normal, and bad, according to the value of the SI). These 12 pictures were rated on attractiveness by two independent sets of women ($N=88$ and $N=76$). Facial attractiveness ratings were significantly ($P<.05$) and positively correlated with sperm morphology, motility, and SI, but not with concentration, for all the women sets. © 2003 Elsevier Science Inc. All rights reserved.

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¹ In memoriam.

1. Introduction

Judgments of facial attractiveness appear to be reliably associated with mate choice (Chen, German, & Zaidel, 1997; Rhodes, Proffitt, Grady, & Sumich, 1998; Thornhill & Gangestad, 1996, 1999a), but what such judgments reveal about the phenotypic quality of the person is not fully elucidated. Certain aspects of facial attractiveness, such as symmetry and proportions (Magro, 1999; Perrett et al., 1998; Perret, May, & Yoshikawa, 1994), may be reliably correlated with health (Cunningham, 1986; Kalick, Zebrowitz, Langlois, & Johnson, 1998; Shackelford & Larsen, 1997, 1999). If what is deemed attractive about a male's face is an honest signal of phenotypic quality, one might anticipate that facial attractiveness judgments would be correlated with semen quality (Barber, 1995; Gangestad, 1993; Grammer & Thornhill, 1994; Pawlowski, Dunbar, & Lipowicz, 2000). The aim of the present study was to investigate whether women's judgements of the attractiveness of men, based on photographs of faces, would be correlated with the quality of the men's semen, according to standard quality indices of morphology, motility, and concentration.

2. Methods

2.1. Male participants

A total of 102 male students from the Universitat de València, Spain, were recruited for this study. The data for 36 men were excluded due to the use of medication, infantile or recent diseases, facial surgery or ornaments (beard, moustache, piercing, etc.), or technical problems during the sampling procedure. The final sample of 66 men ranged in age from 19 to 36 years (mean = 23.4, S.D. = 2.7), with a period of reported sexual abstinence ranging from 1 to 10 days (mean = 4.1, S.D. = 1.5) prior to semen collection.

2.2. Female participants

In order to evaluate the attractiveness of men's images, 75 female students of the Universitat de València were recruited for Study 1. The data from nine women were excluded because they recognized some of the men or because they were using oral contraception. The women ranged in age from 20 to 27 years (mean = 21.8, S.D. = 1.5). For Study 2, another 88 women were recruited (age range = 18–28; mean = 18.6, S.D. = 1.3) without any information about their menstrual cycle, and still another 76 women were recruited (age range = 18–27; mean = 18.8, S.D. = 1.4) with regular cycles, all of them from the Universidad de Zaragoza (320 km from València).

The 75 women in Study 1 and the 76 women from Zaragoza were asked about the first day of their last menstrual period and the length in days of the menstrual cycle. The fertility risk in these women (probability of conception following sex) was estimated on the basis of the values reported by Jöchle (1973) (Table 1).

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