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Symmetry, averageness, and feature size in the facial attractiveness of women

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Abstract

Female facial attractiveness was investigated by comparing the ratings made by male judges with the metric characteristics of female faces. Three kinds of facial characteristics were considered: facial symmetry, averageness, and size of individual features. The results suggested that female face attractiveness is greater when the face is symmetrical, is close to the average, and has certain features (e.g., large eyes, prominent cheekbones, thick lips, thin eyebrows, and a small nose and chin). Nevertheless, the detrimental effect of asymmetry appears to result solely from the fact that an asymmetrical face is a face that deviates from the norm. In addition, a factor analysis indicated that averageness best accounts for female attractiveness, but certain specific features can also be enhancing.
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1. Introduction

Attractiveness is an important element of social life. A large body of research in social psychology has shown that attractive persons enjoy many advantages that unattractive persons do not have (for reviews, see Berscheid & Walster, 1974; Bull & Rumsey, 1988; for a meta-analysis, see Eagly, Ashmore, Makhijani, & Longo, 1991). This well-known stereotype, described by social psychologists as the *What is beautiful is good* prototype (Dion, Berscheid, & Walster, 1972), mainly applies to the formation of first impressions, but it can also extend into less superficial interactions (e.g., Frieze, Olson, & Russell, 1991).

Until recently, beauty was considered to lie in *the eyes of the beholder* (for a historical background, see Bruce & Young, 1998). In that sense, a person's physical appearance is not the main aspect of his/her attractiveness. It is determined instead by the beholder, who probably takes personality into account in addition to physical appearance. Above all, it is believed that each beholder has personal likings that may differ from those of others. Thus, a face may be attractive for some people but unattractive for others. However, some recent studies have reported substantial agreement, not only within the sexes but also across sexes, ethnic groups, and ages (e.g., Cunningham, Roberts, Barbee, Druen, & Wu, 1995; Langlois, Ritter, Roggman, & Vaughn, 1991; Langlois & Roggman, 1990). Moreover, some facial characteristics have been shown to be factors of attractiveness, including closeness to the average (e.g., Langlois & Roggman, 1990), symmetry (e.g., Thornhill & Gangestad, 1993), and the physical characteristics of individual facial features (e.g., Cunningham, 1986). From an evolutionary standpoint, the fact that humans share views about which features are attractive suggests that there are species-typical psychological adaptations that have evolved because of a preference for healthy and fertile mates (Symons, 1979; Thornhill & Gangestad, 1999).

Working on the closeness-to-average factor, (Langlois & Roggman, 1990; see also Grammer & Thornhill, 1994) created composite computer faces by averaging photographs of women or men. The composite faces were assumed to be increasingly closer to the average as the number of faces that went into generating them rose. The authors found that by increasing the number of faces averaged into the composite, they also increased their attractiveness ratings. This observation was found for both female and male faces. Later, this finding was extended to other cultures (Langlois, Roggman, & Musselman, 1994; Pollard, 1995). The caricature versus anti-caricature technique (see Rhodes, Brennan, & Carey, 1987) has also been used to study the relationship between averageness and attractiveness. A caricatured face is a face in which the distinctive features in a set of faces are exaggerated by increasing the distance between the features and their average positions. Decreasing this distance makes the resulting face closer to the average, thereby creating anti-caricatured faces. In studies by Rhodes and Tremewan (1996) and Deffenbacher, Vetter, Johanson, and O'Toole (1998), anti-caricatured faces were deemed more attractive than normal faces, themselves being rated as more attractive than caricatured faces.

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