

Physical attractiveness in preschoolers: Relationships with power, status, aggression and social skills

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Abstract

Several lines of theory and research suggest that power (e.g., social dominance) and status (e.g., social prominence and positive peer regard) are enjoyed by those blessed with good looks. The present work addresses the relations among physical attractiveness, power, status, and aggression from a resource control theoretic perspective that suggests that group members find power holders physically attractive, even if they are aggressive. Teacher ratings of physical attractiveness, social dominance, peer reception, aggression, and social skills were collected on 153 preschoolers (3–6 years) from a Midwestern city. Positive peer regard was derived via sociometric nominations. Raters unfamiliar with the children assessed their physical attractiveness from photographs. Results show that teachers' perceptions of physical attractiveness are a function of power, status, and social skills. Additionally, teachers rated aggressive children who employ both prosocial and coercive strategies of resource control (bistrategic controllers) to be among the most physically attractive. These relations did not emerge for raters unbiased by children's behavior. Results suggest social dominance achieved via prosocial means begets attractiveness ratings, even if accompanied by high levels of aggression. The implications for intervention are discussed.

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“Beauty is power; a smile is its sword. Charles Reade”

Beauty is and has been I believed to be a marked social asset. Accordingly physical attractiveness is perceived to be associated with intelligence (Eagly, Ashmore, Makhijani, & Longo, 1991; Feingold, 1992), self-sufficiency (Dion & Berscheid, 1974), social competence (Eagly et al., 1991; Langlois et al., 2000), prosociality (Dion, 1973; Langlois & Styczynski, 1979), and friendliness (Dion, Berscheid, & Walster, 1972). Even young children express clear social preferences for beauty, perhaps stemming from these stereotyped assumptions (Dion, 1973). Teachers have higher expectations of and are more lenient toward attractive children (Clifford & Walster, 1973; Dion, 1974). As adults, the attractive make more money than the unattractive (10–15% more; Hammermesh & Biddle, 1994).

The belief that beauty advances social power is thus very nearly cliché, perhaps with good reason. Yet surprisingly little work has been done linking physical attractiveness in young children to various indices of power (e.g., social dominance) and status (e.g., social prominence, positive peer regard). The present study attempts to address this gap by examining the perceived physical attractiveness of young children in relation to measures of power and social status (and associated strategies such as aggression): Does attractiveness advance power and status, or do power and status make one attractive (even if one is aggressive)? Finally, what role does a child’s appearance play in his/her attainment of status within the peer group?

Power and status

Power has been differentially defined depending on the domain of inquiry. Social psychologists have defined power as the capacity to influence the states and behaviors of others by virtue of the control of social (friendship, ostracism) and material resources (economic, entertainment; Keltner, Gruenfeld, & Anderson, 2003). With this conceptualization in mind, the closest instantiation of the power concept in the developmental domain is social dominance from a resource control theoretic perspective. Here, social dominance is defined as a child’s relative ability to compete for (attain and defend) material and social resources in the peer group via various strategies (Hawley, 1999).

Status and related concepts derive more from the evaluation of others; positive regard or social prominence may be granted or denied to those of power (Keltner et al., 2003). These group evaluations have been traditionally derived in the developmental and sociological literatures via sociometric interviews or nominations procedures. Social preference, for example, reflects the degree to which one is positively regarded (i.e., liked) by peers, and popularity may be seen as the degree to which one is seen as socially prominent. The relationship between social preference and social prominence has been the target of considerable recent discussion (e.g., Cillessen & Mayeux, 2004; Hawley, Card, & Little, 2007; Lease, Musgrove, & Axelrod, 2002).

Power, status and aggressive self-expression

Aggression is of central interest when it comes to power (social dominance) and status (social preference, social prominence) in children. Aggression appears to have differential relations to these concepts; namely, aggression appears to be one of a number of strategies

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