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Exploiting the beauty in the eye of the beholder: The use of physical attractiveness as a persuasive tactic

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ABSTRACT

It is commonly perceived that women have greater success than men in using their physical attractiveness to persuade members of the opposite-sex to do favors. The current study is the first to empirically test this notion. One hundred and ninety men and women reported their experiences with the use of physical attractiveness as a persuasive tactic between themselves and members of the opposite-sex. Among the results, women reported more frequently having success with the tactic than did men and men reported more frequently having been successfully persuaded by the tactic than did women. Discussion argues that as women age beyond their 20s, they are increasingly less likely to have success with the tactic. Also discussed is how individuals' attempts to reduce cognitive dissonance associated with use of the tactic may affect their reporting and use of it.

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In an episode of the situation-comedy *Seinfeld*, Jerry's attractive girlfriend persuades a male manager at a movie theater to sell them tickets for a movie that is already sold out. She also dissuades a male traffic patrolman from writing a ticket after he stops Jerry for speeding. Similarly, in a recent British reality TV show, simply by being friendly, four attractive young women were able to persuade three young men, whom they had met briefly the day before, to carry out heavy construction work under the sub-tropical sun at the women's villa. The men even assented to the women's requests to refill their drinks as they lay sunbathing beside the pool.

These snippets from popular culture illustrate a notion prevalent in the popular imagination. This is that, without engaging in sexual relations, women more than men are able to successfully use their physical attractiveness to persuade opposite-sex individuals to do favors involving the provision of services or economic resources. Implicit in the notion is that, unlike individuals using their physical attractiveness to secure mates, individuals using their physical attractiveness as a persuasive tactic give the impression that they are sexually attracted to the persuadees when, in fact, they are not attracted to them. Moreover, as the examples indicate, the notion is most closely associated with favors done between individuals who are relative strangers or who do not know each other well.

The notion is further expressed in the archetypical female figures of the "gold digger," who uses her beauty to extract cash or

gifts from men without necessarily engaging in sexual relations, and the "femme fatale," who uses her sexual allure to entice men into compromising situations. It is also illustrated in the beliefs that attractive women have little trouble getting men to give them a ride when they are hitchhiking or help them change a flat tyre. The perception is supported by the prevalence of gentlemen's clubs, in which "exotic dancers" are able to extract substantial sums of money from men without engaging in sexual relations with them.

The use of physical attractiveness as a persuasive tactic may involve enhancing one's appearance through personal grooming and highlighting one's bodily features by wearing tight or revealing clothing (e.g., Tooke & Camire, 1991). Moreover, as it is designed to evoke romantic or sexual interest, it may be considered synonymous with flirting and behaviors such as smiling, touching, and sustaining eye contact (e.g., Moore, 1985). As studies indicate that both men and women value physical attractiveness in a mate (e.g., Hill, 1945; Li, Bailey, Kenrick, & Linsenmeier, 2002), it is expected that both women and men use it as a tactic to persuade opposite-sex individuals.

To the best of our knowledge, the only empirical findings concerning the degree to which men and women use physical attractiveness as a persuasive tactic have been secured from investigations into negotiations between individuals of unequal power or status. For instance, Salter, Grammer, and Rikowski (2005) investigated whether subordinate men and women use different tactics when attempting to obtain concessions from powerful males. Salter et al. found that for female but not male patrons

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attempting to gain access to an exclusive nightclub with male doormen, there was a positive correlation between “sexiness” of dress (measured by tightness of clothing and amount of skin showing) and number of affiliative mannerisms used (including smiling, eye contact, presenting of buttocks and chest, and hair stroking). This led Salter et al. to conclude that female patrons used mannerisms in a qualitatively different way from males, namely as courtship signals to release sexual motivation in men. Moreover, for female but not male patrons, both sexiness of dress and number of affiliative mannerisms used were negatively correlated with level of doorman threat, indicating that the use of courtship signals is an effective tactic for women attempting to appease powerful males.

Because all doormen were male, however, Salter et al.’s (2005) findings do not address whether there are sex differences in tactics used to persuade individuals of the opposite-sex. In addition, the results may be limited by the fact that Salter et al. followed other researchers in investigating the relationship between sex differences in nonverbal behavior and sex differences in perceived dominance. In seminal studies, researchers argued that the nonverbal behavior of men and women is determined by sex differences in the power hierarchy of American society (Henley, 1977; Goffman, 1976). Specifically, these researchers contended that patriarchy has resulted in women typically enacting nonverbal behaviors that are submissive in comparison to those typically enacted by men. Subsequent studies have provided little support for this argument, however. Instead, researchers have found much ambiguity regarding whether behaviors are perceived as submissive, dominant or belonging to some other descriptive category (e.g., Halberstadt & Saitta, 1987; Hall, 2006).

It may not be valid, therefore, to consider the use of physical attractiveness as a persuasive tactic that is specific to individuals between whom there is a differential in power or status. Rather, as it serves to evoke sexual interest, we contend that it should be considered a tactic used specifically by individuals who believe that the individuals whom they wish to persuade perceive them as potential mates.

If individuals use their physical attractiveness to persuade opposite-sex individuals who perceive them as potential mates, then the tactic involves one sex exploiting the other’s desire for physical attractiveness in mates. As such, the sex expected to be more susceptible to being exploited by the tactic is the one whose members place greater importance in a potential mate’s physical attractiveness. Numerous studies using different methodologies have found that men place greater importance than do women on the physical appearance of mates (e.g., Buss, 1989a; Kenrick, Neuberg, Zierk, & Krones, 1994). In line with this, the mating tactics found to be most frequently used by and effective for women, but not by and for men, include embellishing their physical appearance (Tooke & Camire, 1991).

Moreover, the physical features that men have evolved to be especially attracted to are those possessed by women in their teens and 20s, including skin that is unwrinkled and not sagging, hair that is not gray, pert breasts and buttocks, and a relatively low waist-to-hip ratio (e.g., Singh, 1993; Symons, 1995). This is because before puberty women are infertile and after puberty their fertility rises until peaking in their late 20s. In addition, although women’s fertility remains relatively high until their mid-30s, their *reproductive value* or the number of children that they are likely to produce *in the future* steadily declines after peaking in their late teens (e.g., Symons, 1979).

The forgoing indicates that women are likely to be more successful than men in using their physical attractiveness as a tactic to persuade opposite-sex individuals and women in their teens and 20s are likely to have more success than other women with the tactic. As the women participating in the current study are

all in their teens and 20s, this leads us to derive the following predictions:

Prediction 1: Women will provide a higher mean rating than men regarding the frequency of *successfully* using their physical attractiveness to persuade opposite-sex strangers to do favors.

Prediction 2: Men will provide a higher mean rating than women regarding the frequency of opposite-sex strangers *successfully* using their physical attractiveness to persuade them to do favors.

If women have greater success using physical attractiveness as a persuasive tactic and if successful use of the tactic furthered the reproductive success of ancestral persuaders, then there would have been greater selection pressures on women than on men to use the tactic. This leads to the following predictions:

Prediction 3: Women will provide a higher mean rating than men regarding the frequency of using their physical attractiveness in *attempting* to persuade opposite-sex strangers to do favors.

Prediction 4: Men will provide a higher mean rating than women regarding the frequency of opposite-sex strangers using their physical attractiveness in *attempting* to persuade them to do favors.

If women are more successful than men in using physical attractiveness as a persuasive tactic and if the tactic involves the persuaders not being physically attracted to the persuadees, the following may be predicted:

Prediction 5: Men will provide a higher mean rating than women regarding the frequency of having been persuaded to do favors by opposite-sex strangers using their physical attractiveness, only to later discover that the persuaders were not physically attracted to them.

It follows that the psychology that facilitates individuals using the tactic is expected to have resulted in an evolutionary arms race, for it would have produced selection pressures for the evolution of a psychology that facilitates individuals avoiding being exploited by the tactic. This psychology is expected to motivate persuadees to refuse to continue doing favors for persuaders who have used their physical attractiveness to persuade them to do a favor but who later indicate that they are not physically attracted to the persuadees (e.g., Buss, 1989b). Resentment or anger, for example, would motivate the termination of cooperation. If women are more successful than men in using their physical attractiveness as a persuasive tactic, the following may be predicted:

Prediction 6: Men will provide a higher mean rating than women regarding the frequency of feeling resentment after being persuaded to do favors by opposite-sex strangers using their physical attractiveness and becoming aware that the persuaders were not physically attracted to them.

Prediction 7: Women will provide a higher mean rating than men regarding the frequency of experiencing opposite-sex strangers whom they had persuaded to do favors using their physical attractiveness expressing resentment when the individuals became aware that they were not physically attracted to them.

1. Method

1.1. Participants

Participants were 190 undergraduates at a public university in the southeastern United States (78 men, *M* age = 20.3 years, *SD* = 2.6; 112 women, *M* age = 22.5 years, *SD* = 2.6). Men were aged 18 years to 28 years and women were aged 18 years to 29 years. Participants self-recruited by signing up on a notice board posted in a university building. The sign-up sheet stated that participants must be heterosexual. Participants received one credit towards a three-credit requirement as part of a General Psychology class.

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