

Attractiveness and sexual behavior: Does attractiveness enhance mating success?

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Abstract

If attractiveness is an important cue for mate choice, as proposed by evolutionary psychologists, then attractive individuals should have greater mating success than their peers. We tested this hypothesis in a large sample of adults. Facial attractiveness correlated with the number of short-term, but not long-term, sexual partners, for males, and with the number of long-term, but not short-term, sexual partners and age of first sex, for females. Body attractiveness also correlated significantly with the number of short-term, but not long-term, sexual partners, for males, and attractive males became sexually active earlier than their peers. Body attractiveness did not correlate with any sexual behavior variable for females. To determine which aspects of attractiveness were important, we examined associations between sexual behaviors and three components of attractiveness: sexual dimorphism, averageness, and symmetry. Sexual dimorphism showed the clearest associations with sexual behaviors. Masculine males (bodies, similar trend for faces) had more short-term sexual partners, and feminine females (faces) had more long-term sexual partners than their peers. Feminine females (faces) also became sexually active earlier than their peers. Average males (faces and bodies) had more short-term sexual partners and more extra-pair copulations (EPC) than their peers. Symmetric women (faces) became sexually active earlier than their peers. Given that male reproductive success depends more on short-term mating opportunities

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than does female reproductive success, these findings suggest that individuals of high phenotypic quality have higher mating success than their lower quality counterparts.

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1. Introduction

Impressed by cultural diversity in beautification practices, Darwin (1874) concluded that humans lacked universal, biologically based standards of beauty. However, evidence that perceptions of attractiveness are similar across cultures (Langlois et al., 2000) and emerge early in development (Rubenstein, Langlois, & Kalakanis, 1999; Slater et al., 1998) challenge this view. Evolutionary psychologists propose that perceptions of attractiveness are species-wide, sexually selected adaptations for finding good mates (Fink & Penton-Voak, 2002; Rhodes & Zebrowitz, 2002; Thornhill & Gangestad, 1999). If attractive traits and preferences for them are under sexual selection, then those traits should be associated with individual variation in mating success. The present study was designed to test this hypothesis.

In most animals, differential parental investment by males and females leads to different mating strategies. A greater investment by females (gestation, lactation, etc.) means that their reproductive potential is lower than that of males (Clutton-Brock & Parker, 1992; Trivers, 1972; Williams, 1975). Males, with a minimum investment in sperm, can increase their reproductive success by obtaining fertilizations with several females, although they may also benefit from providing parental care in the context of long-term relationships. Females have less to gain from mating with several males (Arnold & Duvall, 1994; Bateman, 1948), and it is more important to secure male parental investment for reproductive success (Buss & Schmitt, 1993; Clutton-Brock, 1991; Daly & Wilson, 1983; Symons, 1979; Trivers, 1972). Such investment can be provided either by one (monogamy) or a series (serial monogamy) of long-term mates. Therefore, if attractive individuals have a reproductive advantage over their peers, then we would expect attractive males to have more short-term mating success, and attractive females to have more long-term mating success than their peers. The lifetime reproductive success of both sexes can also be enhanced by becoming sexually active as soon as the individual is fertile. Therefore, we would expect attractive traits to be negatively correlated with age of first sex in both males and females.

For species that form pair bonds, both males and females can gain additional reproductive success through extra-pair copulations (EPCs). Males can always enhance their reproductive success through seeking additional mates, and in some human societies, men will seek EPCs given the opportunity (e.g., Marlowe, 1999). Females can also benefit from EPCs. In nonhuman animals, such as birds, females who are paired with low-quality males have been shown to enhance their reproductive success by seeking EPCs with males of higher quality than their long-term partner (Hasselquist, Bensch, & Schantz, 1996; Kempenaers et al., 1992). Male EPC activity is likely to be constrained primarily by females' willingness to participate. Therefore, for males, we would expect attractive traits to

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