Facial attractiveness, weight status, and personality trait attribution: The role of attractiveness in weight stigma

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Summary The current study examined the influence of facial attractiveness and weight status on personality trait attributions (e.g., honest, friendly) among more and less facially attractive as well as thin and overweight models. Participants viewed pictures of one of four types of models (overweight/less attractive, overweight/more attractive, thin/less attractive, thin/more attractive) and rated their attractiveness (facial, body, overall) and personality on 15 traits. Facial attractiveness and weight status additively impacted personality trait ratings. In mediation analyses, the facial attractiveness condition was no longer associated with personality traits after controlling for perceived facial attractiveness in 12 personality traits. Conversely, the thin and overweight condition was no longer associated with personality traits after controlling for perceived body attractiveness in only 2 personality traits. Post hoc moderation analysis indicated that weight status differently influenced the association between body attractiveness and personality trait attribution. Findings bear implications for attractiveness bias, weight bias, and discrimination research.

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The role of attractiveness in weight stigma

Weight stigma and negative attributions

Weight stigma is well-documented [29]. Relative to thinner individuals, individuals who are overweight or obese are disliked [5], perceived to have negative personality attributes [1,5,20,23,35], and perceived to have impaired abilities [1,2,5,23]. Overweight individuals report experiencing stigmatisation based on their weight in the form of mistreatment, teasing, bullying, negative judgments, harassment, hostility, and discrimination from various groups, including family, employers, and health care professionals [9,11,24,26,27,28,30,36,40].

Generally speaking, common negative attributions include, but are not limited to, the beliefs that overweight and obese individuals are self-indulgent, socially inept, unattractive, incompetent, unclean, sloppy, lazy, sexually undesirable, and lacking in self-control, motivation, and self-discipline [1,2,5,11,20,23,27,26,35,41]. It is likely that some of the attributions of negative personality traits assigned to individuals who are overweight involve value judgments about their physical attractiveness and sexual desirability [1,2,20,35]. Therefore, one factor driving the negative attributions assigned to obese individuals may be that people find excess weight to be unattractive.

Attractiveness halo effect

There is also a large body of research demonstrating positive attributions people make about individuals who are judged as facially attractive [7,8,10,19,32,33]. This phenomenon, which is sometimes called the "attractiveness halo effect," the "physical attractiveness stereotype," or the "beauty is good" stereotype, involves a tendency to assume that facially attractive individuals possess an array of positive personal traits or qualities. Research studies document attributions of several positive qualities to attractive individuals, which may include sociability, trustworthiness, genuineness, kindness, empathy, sophistication, independence, compassion, generosity, likeability, intelligence, high motivation, and academic, occupational, and interpersonal competence [6,8,10,18,19].

Attractiveness bias

Similar to the discrimination against overweight individuals, facially unattractive people are treated less favourably than facially attractive people in a number of domains. For example, research has documented that facially attractive individuals experience occupational benefits due to their appearance, including higher rankings during job interviews [7], greater likelihood of being hired [22,34], and earning higher wages than less attractive individuals [16]. In addition, a meta-analysis [18] revealed that facially attractive adults are judged as more occupationally competent (d = .90), more interpersonally competent (d = .45), and as having greater social appeal (d = .49) than unattractive adults. Results also demonstrated that facially attractive adults experience more positive interactions (d = .57) and fewer negative interactions (d = -.54) than facially unattractive adults. Facial attractiveness has a significant, and often large, effect on the judgments or attributions people make about individuals, as well as on the ways in which people treat individuals.

Evolutionary factors

Evolutionary researchers contend that people perceive and behave towards attractive individuals favourably because attractiveness is an honest indicator of genetic fitness, physical health, and mate value [3,17,31,37–39]. Similar arguments are made for people who are overweight [21]. As a result of this, overweight and less attractive individuals may be viewed as risky mates or allies because facial asymmetry and obesity serve as indicators of poor genetic fitness. These critical attributions may result in negative judgments of and behaviours towards unattractive individuals [17,31,38,39].

The current study

It is unclear to what extent attractiveness, relative to other more socially constructed aspects of stigma, plays a role in the attribution of negative personality traits to obese individuals [1,2,20,35]. The aims of this investigation were twofold. The first aim was to examine which personality traits are attributed to individuals of higher and lower facial attractiveness and higher and lower weight. The second aim was to examine whether participants’ perceptions of models’ attractiveness mediated the association between personality trait attributions and higher and lower model facial attractiveness and higher and lower model weight, respectively.
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