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Effects of the beholder's age on the perception of facial attractiveness

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Abstract

Children have been shown to prefer faces rated as highly attractive by adults over faces rated as quite unattractive. We investigated to what extent this agreement holds not only for the general direction of preferences but for preference strengths as well. In a choice experiment, we presented 40 nine-year-old girls and their mothers and 40 twelve-year-old girls and their mothers with pairs of women's and girls' faces and asked the subjects to pick the face that appeared prettier to them. Preference frequencies and simple attractiveness scales derived from these preference frequencies by fitting the Bradley–Terry–Luce rule (Luce, D. R. (1959). *Individual choice behavior: a theoretical analysis*. New York: Wiley) were compared across subject groups. For the women's faces, we found no difference in preferences between nine-year-olds, twelve-year-olds, and adults, neither in direction nor in strength. For the girls' faces, we also found no major differences in preference direction, however, we did find reliable differences in preference strengths. To a considerable part these differences were due to the fact that the children showed less pronounced preferences between face stimuli than the adults. These results suggest a role of developmental factors in the perception of facial attractiveness. © 2000 Elsevier Science B.V. All rights reserved.

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1. Introduction

Facial attractiveness plays a major role in the formation of interpersonal social judgements (for a review see e.g. Hatfield & Sprecher, 1986). Many studies showed that attractive individuals enjoy advantages over less attractive people. They are perceived as more likeable, kind, and intelligent (Berscheid & Walster, 1974) and are more likely to be professionally successful than their less attractive counterparts (Frieze, Olson & Russel, 1991). Even children have been shown to be differentially evaluated on the basis of their physical appearance, both by peers (Dion, 1973) and by adults (Clifford & Walster, 1973; Felson, 1981). Facial attractiveness has been demonstrated to influence the status within the peer group (Berscheid & Walster, 1974) as well as evaluation of school performance by teachers (Clifford & Walster, 1973; Felson, 1981).

Such biases in favor of attractive individuals were for a long time thought to be based on prevalent socio-cultural norms. Judgements of attractiveness were viewed as depending largely on fashion and the underlying mechanisms were viewed as being only gradually acquired through internalization of prevalent socio-cultural stereotypes in the course of individual development. Over the past 10 years, however, evidence has accumulated which suggests that the perception of facial attractiveness may be remarkably similar across both different cultures (Bernstein, Lin & McClellan, 1982; Cunningham, Roberts, Barbee, Druen & Wu, 1995; Jones & Hill, 1993; Perrett, May & Yoshikawa, 1994) and different age groups (Cavior & Lombardi, 1973; Cross & Cross, 1971). The results of studies examining the influence of the beholder's age on the perception of facial attractiveness (Langlois, Roggman, Casey, Ritter, Rieser-Danner & Jenkins, 1987; Samuels & Ewy, 1985) in fact indicate that already children as young as three months old are able to discriminate between rather attractive and unattractive faces. The perception of facial attractiveness, therefore, seems to have a sizeable biological basis and to be not an arbitrary product of social norms. But while matters seem fairly clear at the extremes of the attractiveness continuum, it is much less clear to what degree people at different ages differ in the extent to which they perceive differences between less extreme stimuli and to what degree the type of stimulus and experiential or maturational factors play a role in mediating this ability.

Recent work on the neural mechanisms underlying face processing abilities indicates that maturational factors indeed play a role in several aspects of face processing. For instance, Taylor, McCarthy, Saliba and Degiovanni (1999) demonstrated a gradual maturation for a face-specific electrophysiological component throughout childhood and adolescence. Their study seems remarkable in that it did not involve a specific task which may have confounded face perception with other activities such as recognition or recall but simply compared neural responses when viewing faces with neural responses to other classes of objects in different age groups. On the basis of their result the authors suggest that face processing undergoes a gradual, quantitative maturation but no qualitative change during individual development.

With regard to the processing of facial expression, Kolb, Wilson and Taylor (1992) found that performance levels of eight- to thirteen-year-old children in an

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