

The effect of nonphysical traits on the perception of physical attractiveness Three naturalistic studies

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Abstract

From an evolutionary perspective, beauty is regarded as an assessment of fitness value. The fitness value of a social partner can be influenced by both physical and nonphysical traits. It follows that the perceived beauty of a social partner can be influenced by nonphysical traits such as liking, respect, familiarity, and contribution to shared goals in addition to physical traits such as youth, waist-to-hip ratio, and bilateral symmetry. We present three studies involving the evaluation of known social partners showing that judgments of physical attractiveness are strongly influenced by nonphysical factors. Females are more strongly influenced by nonphysical factors than males and there are large individual differences within each sex. In general, research on physical attractiveness based on the evaluation of purely physical traits of strangers might miss some of the most important factors influencing the perception of physical attractiveness among known associates.

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1. Introduction

A sense of beauty is often regarded as uniquely human and without any practical value. In contrast, evolutionary biologists increasingly view beauty as an assessment of

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fitness value, computed by a phylogenetically ancient set of cognitive mechanisms that are almost certainly shared with other animals (Voland & Grammer, 2003). The basic idea is that organisms are constantly faced with decisions about where to move, with whom to interact, and so on. Each decision requires assessing the fitness value of the alternatives. In the case of habitat, the relevant factors might be food, water, and protection from predators (Orians & Heerwagen, 1992; White & Heerwagen, 1998). In the case of social partners, the relevant factors might be fecundity, strength, or health (Buss, 1999; Thornhill, 1998). In both cases, the cognitive mechanisms operate automatically and largely beneath conscious awareness. The most fitness-enhancing alternative is simply perceived as most attractive and the organism is “drawn” to what is regarded as most attractive by definition.

A fundamental implication of this view is that the perception of beauty should be influenced by nonphysical factors in addition to physical factors. For example, consider a man evaluating a woman as a possible marriage partner. The woman has a set of physical traits that contribute to her fitness value for the man: her youth, health, symmetry, waist-to-hip ratio, and so on. She also has a set of nonphysical traits that contribute to her fitness value for the male: her niceness, intelligence, sense of humor, compatibility, willingness to work hard, availability, and especially how much she likes him. The total fitness value of the woman for the man is based on a combination of physical and nonphysical traits. The question is how will the man perceive the *physical* attractiveness of the woman? One possibility is that his assessment of her physical attractiveness will be based on purely physical traits even though his choice might be influenced by other traits. He might think (consciously or unconsciously) “this person is only moderately physically attractive but has other nonphysical virtues that make her desirable to me.” Another possibility is that his assessment of her physical attractiveness will be based on her overall fitness value, including her nonphysical traits. He might simply be drawn to her and would rate her as more physically attractive than others who are unaware of her nonphysical traits. Both scenarios are theoretically possible but the second is most faithful to the basic concept of beauty as an assessment of fitness value.

A few studies have examined the effect of nonphysical factors on the judgment of physical attractiveness. Early studies that were not inspired by evolution include Gross and Crofton’s (1977) paper “What Is Good Is Beautiful,” written in response to Dion, Berscheid, and Walster’s (1972) landmark paper “What Is Beautiful Is Good,” and Nisbett and Wilson’s (1977) demonstration of a “halo effect” in which evaluations of one attribute of a person are generalized to influence evaluations of other attributes (see also Feingold 1992; Felson & Bohrenstedt, 1979; Owens & Ford, 1978). The famous “closing time effect” (Gladue & Delaney, 1990) demonstrates that simple availability can influence the perception of physical attractiveness. More recent studies inspired by evolutionary psychology show that social status (Townsend & Levy, 1990) and prosocial orientation (Jensen-Campbell, West, & Graziano, 1995) enhance perception of physical attractiveness. These are, however, vastly outnumbered by studies that focus entirely on physical traits. For example, a recent review of facial attractiveness by Langlois, Kalakanis, Rubenstein, Larson, Hallam, and

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