

Is Kindness Physically Attractive?

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One of the most robust findings in social psychology is the beauty-is-good stereotype: physically attractive people are perceived and treated more positively than physically unattractive people [1]. But here's the thing: I have definitely met attractive people who went from hot to not the second they opened their mouths! Vice-versa, some people are so kind and awesome that you can't help but be attracted to them, regardless of their score on hornotnot.com.

Which has me wondering: I know beautiful is often perceived as good, but isn't good also beautiful? I mean, I know we are an extremely looks obsessed culture, and research does show that the people we initially perceive as physically attractive tend to follow a very predictable pattern: they are average, symmetrical, and have hormone-dependent features [2]. But don't things like character and goodness also factor into our perceptions of physical attractiveness?

Enter a new study by Yan Zhang and colleagues. The researchers randomly assigned Chinese participants to one of three groups and had them rate 60 photographs of unfamiliar Chinese female faces. All the photographs were taken from Google, and all of the faces had neutral emotional expressions. After two weeks, the participants rated the same pictures again. But this time, one group of participants were given positive personality descriptors of the people in the photographs (e.g., decent, honest), another group of participants were given negative personality descriptors (e.g., evil, mean), and the third group were given no information about the people in the photographs.

During the first rating, there were no significant differences in ratings of attractiveness among the three groups. But after the second rating, the group given positive personality descriptors of the people in the photographs rated them the most attractive, and the group given negative personality descriptors of the people in the photographs gave the lowest ratings to the photographs.

These results suggest that having a desirable personality may indeed be a factor when judging physical attractiveness. As the researchers note, "This findings indicates that human interior psychological activity is related to exterior physical feature[s], and that a human is the whole entity of psychology and physiology."

But perhaps this study was too artificial. Maybe the same effects wouldn't occur for people who we know intimately. There is a series of really fascinating studies conducted by Kevin Kniffin and David Sloan Wilson, in which they address this very issue. As they note, there are evolutionary reasons why personality traits can inform our perceptions of physical attractiveness. Even though beauty is an assessment of fitness value, there is no reason why assessment of fitness needs to be purely physical. Fitness value of a potential social partner can be influenced by both physical and non-physical traits.

In one study, participants rated the photographs of classmates in their high school yearbooks for physical attractiveness, familiarity, liking, and respect. The researchers then had strangers (of the same sex and roughly same age) who had never met the people behind the photographs rate the same photographs for physical attractiveness. In general, the more the people in the yearbook were familiar, liked, and respected, the more physically attractive they were perceived to be. The effect of non-physical traits on perceptions of physical attractiveness was significant for both sexes.

The researchers give a really neat example of their effect. After a particular participant completed her rating, the researchers looked at the photograph of the male who she regarded as least physically attractive. To the researchers, and the strangers who rated this man, he did not seem ugly but actually quite average in physical attractiveness. When they showed her the photograph and asked why she rated him so ugly, her face was one of disgust as she explained what a horrible person he was. She was physically disgusted by the image of this guy, even though his horrible personality has nothing to do with his his physical features. This woman's

perception of this man's physical attractiveness remained this intense, even after 30 years since last she had seen him!

In a second study, members of a university rowing team were asked after the training and competitions were over for the year to rate all other team members on the following dimensions: talent, effort, respect, liking, and physical attractiveness. The males on the team were also rated for physical attractiveness by a group of strangers about the same age as the crew members (the photo was a group photo).

As in Study 1, for both males and females, perceptions of physical attractiveness were heavily influenced by non-physical traits. Also, the ratings made by the strangers and the ratings made by the crew members who had information about the non-physical traits of the other crew members differed significantly.

As a vivid example, the researchers describe a male team member who was perceived as the slacker of the team and the main focus of negative gossip. It turns out that he was uniformly rated physically ugly by the other members of the team. In contrast was another member of the team, who worked so hard that there were discussions of him as a possible contender for the U.S. Olympic team. This guy was rated by everyone on the team as physically attractive. The most interesting thing is that this large difference in perceived physical attractiveness between the two crew members was not evidenced by the raters who did not know anything about the contributions of these two men.

In a third study, students in 6-week summer archaeology course rated each other on the first day of class on familiarity, intelligence, effort, liking, and physical attractiveness. The same students then did the same ratings again on the last day of class, after working with each other for the 6 weeks on a dig site, working 5 days per week and approximately 8 hours per day with each other. Consistent with the first two studies, non-physical traits (especially liking) contributed to final perceptions of physical attractiveness above and beyond the effects of the initial impressions of physical attractiveness.

On the first day of class, one woman received a below average rating (mean of 3.25) of physical attractiveness by the other members of the class. However, this woman turned out to be a quite popular, well liked, and hardworking member of the group. Strikingly, this woman went from a mean of 3.25 on the first day of class to a mean of 7.00 by the last day of class! Her rating of physical attractiveness increased quite a lot, and she presumably did not do one thing to alter her physical appearance.

These results suggest that sometimes our initially hardwired gut reaction to appearance can be overridden, and sometimes even without effort. All it may take is increased familiarity about the person. As the researchers note, "Among people who actually know and interact with each other, the perception of physical attractiveness is based largely on traits that cannot be detected from physical appearance alone, either from photographs or from actually observing the person before forming a relationship."

I agree with the researchers that we should be particularly wary of basing physical attractiveness strictly on ratings of photographs by strangers or even on first impressions of physical appearance without at least learning a bit more about their character. But I especially like the beauty tip the researchers give: "If you want to enhance your physical attractiveness, become a valuable social partner."

I know this is not your standard beauty tip, but the results of these studies do suggest that if you want to improve your physical attractiveness, strengthening the content of your character may be the most effective thing you can do.

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Note: Portions of this post were taken from this earlier article at Psychology Today.

[1] People even activate the same areas of their brains both while making attractiveness judgements about faces and making goodness judgments about hypothetical actions.

[2] For more on the physical and non-physical factors influencing physical attractiveness, see "Mating Intelligence Unleashed: The Role of the Mind in Sex, Dating, and Love", co-authored with Glenn Geher.