

Current Comments

Putting Your Best Face Forward: The Social Psychology of Physical Attractiveness

Number 34

August 23, 1982

Japanese aristocrats of both sexes, during the Heian Period (794-1191), applied rouge to their cheeks, but never to their lips. They did not want to draw attention to the mouth, which they considered a rather bestial part of the body.¹ Ancient Egyptians such as Princess Nefertiti, as well as some people of the ancient societies of Greece, Rome, France, and America, had their heads artificially elongated in the belief that this enhanced their beauty.² (p. 46)

In contemporary Nigeria, a people called the Tiv scar their bodies and chip their teeth for aesthetic reasons.³ (p. 75-80) The Bangwa of Cameroon, like many present-day cultures, use scars to indicate social status. In the South Seas, Melanesian traders believe in the magical efficacy of face and body paints to close business deals.³ (p. 46-7)

To those of us living in the industrialized West, these beauty enhancing practices may seem bizarre or even absurd. Yet, as Robert Brain points out in *The Decorated Body*, we have similar beliefs and practices. German university students used to slash each other's faces during duels. The students then poured wine into the wounds to exaggerate the scarring. The scars were taken as proof of manliness and strength.³ (p. 68,73) Brain also compares the American businessperson's belief in "dressing for success" to the Melanesian trader's faith in the mystical power of cosmetics.³ (p. 46-7) In fact, it's fair to say that Americans are as preoccupied with

physical attractiveness as any society. Americans spend about \$11 billion per year on cosmetics alone.⁴

Humans aren't the only creatures influenced by attractiveness. Many animals seem to be greatly affected by attractiveness among their own kind. Female peafowl seem to choose as mates the males with the largest, brightest, most intricate tails. Presumably, in their evolution the peacocks with the most spectacular tails were the ones most likely to find mates. Natural selection may account for the peacock's present-day beauty. Matt Ridley, Oxford University, suggests that the peacock's tail (or "train") may even exert a hypnotic effect on the female. He writes, "Perhaps hypnosis is too strong a word. But how often in romantic literature do people 'fall under each other's spell'? Is it too absurd to deny the peacock's 'jewelled splendor' the same power over the peahen?"⁵

Whether physical attractiveness helps people along the evolutionary ladder is an open question. Such speculations are now part of the new and highly controversial field of sociobiology.^{6,7}

In fact, most of what we know today about attractiveness comes from psychologists and other social scientists. Interestingly, researchers have not been able to clearly define what most Americans consider physically attractive. A number of factors do seem to contribute to a given person's perception of beauty or attractiveness. Among them are height and slenderness. But in

a 1974 review, Ellen Berscheid, University of Minnesota, and Elaine Walster, University of Wisconsin, stated: "The poetic hope that anyone can be found beautiful by someone seems...to be substantiated by the available data."⁸

Most of the research that's been done on physical attractiveness seems to highlight the advantages of being beautiful. The benefits seem to be numerous. For one thing, physically attractive people presumably make a better impression than those who are less attractive. In 1972, Karen Dion, University of Minnesota, and colleagues published a report describing a "what-is-beautiful-is-good" stereotype.⁹ They showed male and female students photos of "attractive" and "unattractive" males and females. The researchers discovered that attractive people were perceived as having better personalities than others. The attractive were rated as more exciting, sincere, warm, sociable, kind, strong, and sophisticated. They were also rated as more likely to be competent spouses and successful in their careers. Many other variations on this kind of study have confirmed the existence of the "what-is-beautiful-is-good" stereotype.¹⁰⁻¹³ These studies were conducted at institutions including University of Georgia, Iowa State University, and Virginia Commonwealth University.

Other studies indicate that people are more helpful toward the physically attractive. For example, W. Andrew Harell, University of Alberta, Canada, had "attractive" and "unattractive" women ask 216 college men for directions. The men gave the greatest amount of help and attention to the attractive confederates.¹⁴ Ralph Sroufe and co-workers, Old Dominion University, Virginia, had "attractive" or "unattractive" confederates leave coins in a phone booth. They approached 180 subjects who found the misplaced cash. The subjects were more likely to admit to the attractive confederates that they'd found the money.¹⁵

Peter L. Benson, Earlham College, Indiana, and colleagues reported similar results. Graduate school application forms, with photos of applicants attached, were "accidentally" left behind at airport phone booths. Attractive applicants were more likely to get their applications back.¹⁶

Even being seen with an attractive person seems to reflect well on the other person. Kim Strane and Carol Watts, University of Texas at Austin, photographed a woman with an attractive man, and again with an unattractive man. The subjects who saw the woman with the more attractive man liked her better than those who saw her with the less attractive companion.¹⁷ An earlier study, by Harold Sigall and David Landy, University of Rochester, found that men were more highly rated when subjects associated them with attractive women.¹⁸ It's not known, however, whether this "radiation effect" occurs among companions of the same sex.¹⁹

Considering these results, it may seem surprising that research subjects do not always look kindly upon the beautiful. A 1975 study by Marshall Dermer and Darrel L. Thiel, University of Wisconsin, bears this out. They asked men and women to rate photographs of women for physical attractiveness. Then they asked them what kind of people they thought the models in the photos were. Attractive women were judged more likely to be sociable, professionally successful, and "heterosexually alluring." But they were also deemed to be more vain, likely to have a divorce or extramarital affair, snobbish, and "bourgeois" (that is, "unsympathetic to oppressed people").²⁰

Beauty or its absence seems to have other serious consequences. It may influence the outcome of one's education.²¹ Michael B. Ross, University of Akron, and John Salvia, Pennsylvania State University, report that teachers give more favorable ratings to attractive

children. For unattractive children, teachers were more willing to recommend that they be placed in classes for the learning-impaired. And they had generally lower expectations of the children's future academic and social development.²² However, other reports seem to play down the effects of attractiveness on education. For example, a study by Margaret M. Clifford, University of Iowa, found no correlation between student attractiveness and scholastic achievement.²³ And a study of 96 humanities and social sciences undergraduate students at St. Xavier's College, Bombay, India, showed that attractiveness did not influence their aspirations to further education.²⁴

Physical attractiveness may also have something to do with employment patterns. A 1975 study by Robert L. Dipboye, University of Tennessee, and co-workers suggests that good looks help a person get hired. They showed college students and professional interviewers bogus resumes for a managerial job. Each resume contained a photo of the applicant. The resume readers preferred to hire males rather than females, and applicants with the highest academic standing. They also preferred the attractive applicants.²⁵ Similar findings have been reported by Thomas F. Cash and colleagues, Old Dominion University. They also report that attractiveness may not benefit applicants for jobs deemed appropriate for the opposite sex.²⁶

In 1979, Madeline E. Heilman and Lois R. Saruwatari, Yale University, observed hiring patterns for attractive and unattractive people of both sexes who applied for managerial or nonmanagerial positions. They found that attractiveness was consistently helpful to male applicants. But for females, attractiveness helped them get hired only when applying for the low-status, nonmanagerial positions. In fact, attractiveness seemed to work *against* women applying for top positions. The researchers hinted at the

unfairness of this when they entitled their paper "When beauty is beastly."²⁷

Attractiveness can even influence matters of legal justice. Some researchers, using mock trials, have tested how judges and juries deal with attractive and unattractive defendants. Many complex factors, such as the severity and type of accusation, and the type of juror, have been taken into account. The general trend, however, is toward more frequent and more severe sentencing of the unattractive defendant.²⁸ But Sigall and Nancy Ostrove reported in 1975 that the defendant's use of his attractiveness in his crime contributed to the outcome. Jurors gave less severe sentences to attractive burglars. But attractive swindlers were judged more harshly, presumably because they took advantage of their attractiveness in committing their crime.²⁹

Some people may find it disturbing that a verdict may rest on something as seemingly irrelevant or beyond one's control as physical attractiveness. By the same token, one may find it disturbing but not surprising that physical attractiveness is apparently an important factor in politics. A 1974 study by two University of Toronto researchers examined the results of the 1972 Canadian federal election. In that election 79 candidates competed for 21 parliamentary seats. Attractive candidates averaged more votes than the less attractive ones.³⁰

The Toronto researchers made one unexpected discovery, as well. They observed that unpopular political parties were represented by physically unattractive candidates. They speculated about the reasons. One possibility is that the unattractive are more disaffected with society, and therefore more likely to join a "fringe" party. Another possibility is that minor political parties are more egalitarian than the major ones. Thus they are more likely to nominate unattractive candidates.³⁰

In some cases, opinions of a politician's attractiveness may be determined by political beliefs. In 1954, Gustav Jahoda, University of the Gold Coast, showed Britons photos of Conservative and Labour members of parliament (MPs). Statements such as this were common from Conservative observers: "The ones with breeding in their features are Conservatives. Socialists are rough-looking types." Conversely, Labour supporters made statements such as: "The fat and stupid ones are Conservatives. Labour people have a frank and open appearance."³¹

A more recent study, by Ray Bull and Caroline Hawkes, North East London Polytechnic, suggests that no matter what their political views, people can make good guesses based on appearance. Conservative and Labour MPs were identified with great accuracy by both Conservative and Labour observers. One unexpected and ambiguous finding was that both Conservative and Labour party members rated Labour MPs as less intelligent looking.³²

Attractiveness is not always a boon in some situations. But the research does indicate many advantages to being attractive. Thus, it's no wonder people spend so much time, effort, and money trying to make themselves beautiful.

Cosmetics account for a large part of that effort. We in the West usually think of cosmetics in terms of face and eye makeup. For this reason many people consider cosmetics strictly the concern of women. However, the cosmetics industry also includes the manufacture of fragrances, hair-care products and treatments, and even wigs. So cosmetics are obviously of interest to both sexes.

Cosmetics seem innocuous enough. But they have their pitfalls, not to mention their steep price. Per Thune, Ullevaal Hospital, Oslo, recently reported ten cases of cosmetic allergies. Some ingredients causing allergies were para-aminobenzoic acid (PABA), which is

used in many sunscreens, and butylhydroxytoluol (BHT), a preservative found in many cosmetics. Thune found that some of the patients were photosensitive to cosmetics as well. And some may have reacted not to a specific ingredient, but to a combination of several.³³ Other researchers have noted allergic reactions to ingredients in hair dye.³⁴ Some hair dyes have even been suspected carcinogens.³⁵

Other types of cosmetics may not be harmful, but unsubstantiated claims are made. Some manufacturers claim that their shampoos and hair conditioners contain "protein." In fact, as Harold J. Morowitz, Yale University, points out, these products contain only amino acids. He writes: "To sell someone amino acids and maintain that it is protein is like selling someone a pile of bricks and maintaining that you are selling them a house." Morowitz says the amino acids which are supposed to benefit one's hair are probably useless.³⁶ (p. 262-5)

There have been studies, though, that show cosmetics have at least one demonstrable benefit. Cosmetics can sometimes cause the wearer to be perceived as more attractive. In a 1969 study, Sigall and Elliot Aronson found they could elicit different opinions about a woman by having different sets of subjects view her with and without makeup. Subjects were more likely to rate a natural brunette as attractive when she wore "tastefully applied" makeup. They were less likely to think of her as pretty when she wore a blond wig and no makeup.³⁷

A more recent study suggests that use of cosmetics can also have good and bad effects on others' perceptions. In 1980, Robert A. Baron, Purdue University, had men rate women who either did or did not wear perfume. The women also dressed either formally or informally. Baron found that women wearing perfume were considered warm and romantic—when they were dressed informally.

The women with both perfume and formal dress were viewed as cold and less romantic. Baron theorized that the men viewed such women as conceited or intimidating. Clearly, cosmetics or perfumes do not *always* improve our perceptions of other people.³⁸

In their review of studies on cosmetics and perceptions of attractiveness, Jean Ann Graham, University of Pennsylvania, and A.J. Jouhar, Bristol-Myers Co., England, comment that appropriate use of cosmetics can be used to achieve physical attractiveness.³⁹

In a 1981 study, Graham and Jouhar had 16 men and 16 women rate four women photographed in each of four different conditions. The first group of photos showed no makeup or hairstyle. A second showed both. The third and fourth displayed either makeup or hairstyle, but not both. Women with hairstyle were rated as more pleasant, clean, tidy, and mature looking. In terms of personality, they were thought to be more poised and organized. They shared all those perceived attributes with the women wearing makeup. Other words used to describe women with makeup were attractive, feminine, sociable, secure, and interesting. Women with hairstyle were also described as more reliable, sensitive, caring, warm, and sincere. The researchers emphasize that it wasn't only perceptions of attractiveness that benefited from cosmetics. Those who used cosmetics were perceived as having better personalities.⁴⁰

In another paper, Graham and Jouhar reported that female cosmetics-wearers claim to use cosmetics to feel good about *themselves*, as well. These subjects tended to report higher expectations, a better self-image, and a better attitude toward others when using makeup. They also found suggestions of different motivations, depending on the age group. In particular, middle-aged women seemed to use cosmetics to help maintain a good attitude toward aging.⁴¹

Similar studies by other researchers also suggest that cosmetics use improves women's self-esteem. Thomas F. Cash and Diane Walker Cash interviewed 42 female college students about their use of cosmetics. The students reported that cosmetics helped them feel more sociable and self-assured. Their research suggested that women who feel self-conscious or dissatisfied with their height or weight may use cosmetics to compensate.⁴²

Graham and Albert M. Kligman, University of Pennsylvania, even suggest that "cosmetic therapy" may be useful in *psychological treatment of the elderly* or cases of depression. Long-term training in effective cosmetics use "might over time...help to enhance the self evaluation and social standing of particularly the physically unattractive elderly."⁴³

In this essay we have cited only a fraction of the many papers published on the subject of physical attractiveness. A large bibliography could be compiled by consulting *Social Sciences Citation Index*[®] (*SSCI*[®]). When we clustered *SSCI* in 1977 we identified a research front specialty entitled "Physical attractiveness." It consists of the paper by Dion and colleagues⁹ plus nine other papers.⁴⁴⁻⁵² One or more of these papers was in turn cited by about 70 papers that year. Some of these were mentioned here earlier.^{10-13,16,21}

The literature on physical attractiveness is considerable but still rather widely dispersed. We know of no journal devoted exclusively to any aspect of the topic except *International Journal of Cosmetic Science*, which is covered in *Current Contents*[®]/*Clinical Practice* (*CC*[®]/*CP*) and *Science Citation Index*[®] (*SCI*[®]). It will also be covered in *ISI/BIOMED*[™] for 1983. However, social sciences journals frequently publish papers on this topic. Some of these journals are *Psychological Reports*, *Journal of Personality & Social Psychology*, and *Journal of Social Psychology*. They are

covered in *CC/Social & Behavioral Sciences*, *SSCI*, *Automatic Subject Citation Alert (ASCA®)*, and *ASCATOP-ICS®*.

Study of the psychology of physical attractiveness and cosmetics provides some interesting insights into human behavior. And, as we have seen, attractiveness seems to have psychological benefits. Perhaps what this research really tells us is that we tend to make quick or superficial judgments based on appearance. In the long run, this

research may help us to overcome our prejudices by making us more aware that they exist. Of course, it also points out the benefits to be derived from enhancing one's attractiveness.

* * * * *

My thanks to Betsy Dru Long, Thomas Marcinko, Lori Perkins, and Amy Stone for their help in the preparation of this essay.

©1982 ISI

REFERENCES

1. Japanese women and cosmetics. *East* 17(7/8):16-20, 1982.
2. Liggett J. *The human face*. New York: Stein and Day, 1974. 287 p.
3. Brain R. *The decorated body*. New York: Harper & Row, 1979. 192 p.
4. Consumer expenditure study. *Prod. Market.* 10(8):32; 46; 49-50; 52; 54, 1981.
5. Kildley M. How the peacock got his tail. *New Sci.* 91:398-401, 1981.
6. Wilson E O. *Sociobiology, the new synthesis*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1975. 697 p.
7. Barash D P. *Sociobiology and behavior*. New York: Elsevier, 1977. 378 p.
8. Berscheid E & Walster E. Physical attractiveness. *Advan. Exp. Soc. Psychol.* 7:157-215, 1974.
9. Dion K, Berscheid E & Walster E. What is beautiful is good. *J. Personal. Soc. Psychol.* 24:285-90, 1972.
10. Mims P R, Hartnett J J & Nay W R. Interpersonal attraction and help volunteering as a function of physical attractiveness. *J. Psychol.* 89:125-31, 1975.
11. Hill M K & Lando H A. Physical attractiveness and sex-role stereotypes in impression formation. *Percept. Mot. Skills* 43:1251-5, 1976.
12. Goldman W & Lewis P. Beautiful is good: evidence that the physically attractive are more socially skillful. *J. Exp. Soc. Psychol.* 13:125-30, 1977.
13. Gross A E & Crofton C. What is good is beautiful. *Sociometry* 40:85-90, 1977.
14. Harrell W A. Physical attractiveness, self-disclosure, and helping behavior. *J. Soc. Psychol.* 104:15-7, 1978.
15. Sroufe R, Chaikin A, Cook R & Freeman V. The effects of physical attractiveness on honesty: a socially desirable response. *Pers. Soc. Psychol. Bull.* 3:59-62, 1977.
16. Benson P L, Karabenick S A & Lerner R M. Pretty pleases: the effects of physical attractiveness, race, and sex on receiving help. *J. Exp. Soc. Psychol.* 12:409-15, 1976.
17. Strane K & Watts C. Females judged by attractiveness of partner. *Percept. Mot. Skills* 45:225-6, 1977.
18. Sigall H & Landy D. Radiating beauty: effects of having a physically attractive partner on person perception. *J. Personal. Soc. Psychol.* 28:218-24, 1973.
19. Cash T F & Derlega V J. The matching hypothesis: physical attractiveness among same-sexed friends. *Pers. Soc. Psychol. Bull.* 4:240-3, 1978.
20. Dermer M & Thiel D L. When beauty may fail. *J. Personal. Soc. Psychol.* 31:1168-76, 1975.
21. Adams G R. Physical attractiveness research. *Hum. Develop.* 20:217-39, 1977.
22. Ross M B & Salvia J. Attractiveness as a biasing factor in teacher judgments. *Amer. J. Ment. Defic.* 80:96-8, 1975.
23. Clifford M M. Physical attractiveness and academic performance. *Child Stud. J.* 5:201-9, 1975.
24. Kanekar S & Ahluwalia R B. Academic aspirations in relation to sex and physical attractiveness. *Psychol. Rep.* 36:834, 1975.
25. Dipboye R L, Fromkin H L & Wuback K. Relative importance of applicant sex, attractiveness, and scholastic standing in evaluation of job applicant resumes. *J. Appl. Psychol.* 60:39-43, 1975.
26. Cash T F, Gillen B & Burns D S. Sexism and "beautyism" in personnel consultant decision making. *J. Appl. Psychol.* 62:301-10, 1977.

27. **Heflman M E & Saruwatari L R.** When beauty is beastly: the effects of appearance and sex on evaluations of job applicants for managerial and nonmanagerial jobs. *Organ. Behav. Hum. Perform.* 23:360-72, 1979.
28. **Leventhal G & Krate R.** Physical attractiveness and severity of sentencing. *Psychol. Rep.* 40:315-8, 1977.
29. **Sigall H & Ostrove N.** Beautiful but dangerous: effects of offender attractiveness and nature of the crime on juristic judgment. *J. Personal. Soc. Psychol.* 31:410-4, 1975.
30. **Efran M G & Patterson E W J.** Voters vote beautiful: the effect of physical appearance on a national election. *Can. J. Behav. Sci.* 6:352-6, 1974.
31. **Jahoda G.** Political attitudes and judgments of other people. *J. Abnormal Soc. Psychol.* 49:330-4, 1954.
32. **Bull R & Hawkes C.** Judging politicians by their faces. *Polit. Stud.—London* 30(1):95-101, 1982.
33. **Thune P.** Photosensitivity and allergy to cosmetics. *Contact Dermatitis* 7:54-5, 1981.
34. **Klein A D & Rodman O G.** Allergic contact dermatitis to paraphenylenediamine in hair dye: case report. *Milit. Med.* 146:46-7, 1981.
35. **Stavraky K M, Clarke E A & Donner A.** A case-control study of hair-dye use and cancers of various sites. *Brit. J. Cancer* 43:236-9, 1981.
36. **Morowitz H J.** *The wine of life and other essays on societies, energy & living things.* New York: St. Martin's Press, 1979. 265 p.
37. **Sigall H & Aronson E.** Liking for an evaluator as a function of her physical attractiveness and nature of the evaluations. *J. Exp. Soc. Psychol.* 5:93-100, 1969.
38. **Trotter R J.** Jungle Gardenia: wear it with jeans. *Sci. News* 118:184, 1980.
39. **Graham J A & Jouhar A J.** Cosmetics considered in the context of physical attractiveness: a review. *Int. J. Cosmetic Sci.* 2:77-101, 1980.
40. -----, The effects of cosmetics on person perception. *Int. J. Cosmetic Sci.* 3:199-210, 1981.
41. -----, *The importance of cosmetics in the psychology of appearance.* Unpublished paper, 1982. 10 p.
42. **Cash T F & Cash D W.** Women's use of cosmetics: psychosocial correlates and consequences. *Int. J. Cosmetic Sci.* 4(1):1-14, 1982.
43. **Graham J A & Kligman A M.** *Physical attractiveness, cosmetic use and self perception in the elderly.* Unpublished paper, 1982. 2 p.
44. **Berscheid E, Dion K, Walster E & Walster G W.** Physical attractiveness and dating choice: a test of the matching hypothesis. *J. Exp. Soc. Psychol.* 7:173-89, 1971.
45. **Brislin R W & Lewis S A.** Dating and physical attractiveness: replication. *Psychol. Rep.* 22:976, 1968.
46. **Byrne D, London O & Reeves K.** The effects of physical attractiveness, sex, and attitude similarity on interpersonal attraction. *J. Personality* 36:259-71, 1968.
47. **Byrne D, Ervin C R & Lambert H J.** Continuity between the experimental study of attraction and real-life computer dating. *J. Personal. Soc. Psychol.* 16:157-65, 1970.
48. **Landy D & Sigall H.** Beauty is talent: task evaluation as a function of the performer's physical attractiveness. *J. Personal. Soc. Psychol.* 29:299-304, 1974.
49. **Miller A G.** Role of physical attractiveness in impression formation. *Psychonomic Sci.* 19:241-4, 1970.
50. **Murstein B I.** Physical attractiveness and marital choice. *J. Personal. Soc. Psychol.* 22:8-12, 1972.
51. **Stroebe W, Insko C A, Thompson V D & Layton B D.** Effects of physical attractiveness, attitude similarity, and sex on various aspects of interpersonal attraction. *J. Personal. Soc. Psychol.* 18:79-91, 1971.
52. **Walster E, Aronson V, Abrahams D & Rottmann L.** Importance of physical attractiveness in dating behavior. *J. Personal. Soc. Psychol.* 4:508-16, 1966.