

# Are Beautiful People Thought to be Better? An Example of the Relationship between Physical Attractiveness and Expectations

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In our society, people who are good-looking are assumed and expected to be better than the rest of the population, especially within the workforce. In the current study it was hypothesized that unattractive applicants would score lower on questions about their personal attributes even though their qualifications for the job were the same as the attractive applicant's. Eighteen female undergraduate students were given two resumes, a resume with a picture of an attractive applicant attached to it and a resume with a picture of an unattractive applicant attached to it. Participants then completed a questionnaire about the applicant's personal attributes. A one-way within subject ANOVA revealed no differences between the attractive and unattractive job applicant.

In our society people who are good-looking are assumed and expected to be better than the rest of the population. According to Kenealy, Frude, and Shaw (2001), research indicates that an individual's physical attractiveness is an important social cue used by others as a basis for social evaluation. This leads one to believe that physical attractiveness affects how society views people and also how people can be misinterpreted based on their looks. Since many people stereotype physically attractive people as being more socially acceptable, it becomes harder for average or unattractive people to be perceived as having positive traits. In one study it was found that physically attractive men and women were perceived as more sociable, dominant, sexually warm, mentally healthy and socially skilled compared to unattractive people (Perlini, Bertolissi, & Lind, 1999). Therefore, it can be concluded that when an attractive person and an unattractive person both apply for a job in the workforce, the unattractive person may not be chosen for the job due to this social phenomenon. Shahani, Dipboye, and Gehrlein (1993) found that attractive applicants in their study tended to be evaluated by interviewers as having better qualifications than unattractive applicants. In their study the people who were being interviewed had the same qualifications; therefore the researchers concluded that because one applicant was better looking than the other, the interviewers assumed that the more attractive applicant had better qualifications. Also, according to previous research attractive people are associated

with positive characteristics, and unattractive people are associated with negative characteristics. It has been found that less attractive persons are judged to be less intelligent, less likely to attempt a college education, less desirable dates, and less sensitive, kind, interesting and sociable (Jones, Hansson, & Phillips, 1978). This thinking is comparable to the "what is beautiful is good" hypothesis because the participants in that particular study chose the better looking applicant based on the fact that they assumed the attractive person would be more socially adequate and better at the job.

Another part of a job interview, which is very important, is the employer's first impression. Even though a first impression may not show the true characteristics of a person, it can stay with an employer throughout the interview process. Therefore, when superficial characteristics such as sex and attractiveness are initially negatively perceived, it seems likely that the final decision will reflect these biases (Cann, Siegfried, & Pearce, 1981). Since some employers rely so much on first impressions, it can be very hard for someone who is considered unattractive to find a job. If an employer gets a negative feeling associated with an unattractive applicant during the first meeting, there is probably a good chance that he/she will not get the job, even if they are overqualified. Not only are attractive people perceived to be more qualified for employment compared to unattractive people, but attractive people are also recommended to receive higher starting salaries (Morrow, McElroy, Stamper, & Wilson, 1990). This finding shows that in this case the "what is beautiful is good" hypothesis is true, and that it can be extremely difficult for an unattractive person to be able to survive in society compared to an attractive person.

In the current experiment the "what is beautiful is good" hypothesis was tested using Langlois and Roggman's (1990) def-

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inition that attractive faces are those that represent the central tendency or the averaged members of a category of faces. Rhodes, Sumich and Byatt (1999) defined unattractive faces as being of low averageness and not perfectly symmetric. In this study, it was hypothesized that the unattractive applicant would score lower on questions about her personal attributes compared to the attractive applicant. The independent variable in the current study was the degree of attractiveness and the dependent variables were the scores the applicants received in regard to their personal attributes.

## Method

### Participants

Participants were 18 female undergraduate students from a northeastern public university. They were recruited through a sign-up sheet that was posted in the psychology department. Participants were compensated with partial course credit.

### Materials

Participants were given a packet containing a job description, a resume with a picture of an attractive applicant attached to it, and another resume with a picture of an unattractive applicant attached to it. The following is the job description that was given to participants:

Teacher Wanted: Fulltime for daycare center. Associates Degree required and must have previous experience working with children. Applicants must have excellent verbal communication skills, be able to work independently as well as with other staff, and they must be able to multi-task. An outstanding professional experience awaits qualified candidates.

After participants read the job description and the resumes, there was a questionnaire that asked specific questions about the applicants' personal attributes. The following are examples of two questions used on the questionnaires: "On a scale of 1-4, 1 being not likely at all and 4 being very likely, how likely is it that the applicant will be able to grasp new information quickly?" and "On a scale of 1-4, 1 being not likely at all and 4 being very likely, how likely is it that the applicant will be able to complete assigned tasks in a timely manner?"

### Procedure

The participants were asked to sit down and carefully examine all of the information in the packet and to answer the questionnaires to the best of their knowledge. Once they finished answering all of the questions, they handed in the packets and the experiment was complete.

## Results

The independent variable in the current study was the degree of attractiveness of the job applicant and the dependent variable was the score that each applicant received in regard to their personal

attributes. This trend was in the direction opposite of predictions. A one-way within subjects ANOVA was used to analyze the data and results were not found to be significant,  $F(14,4) = .641$ ,  $p > .05$ , in that the unattractive applicant did not receive significantly lower scores in regard to her personal attributes compared to that of the attractive applicant. The total score for the attractive applicant was high, as predicted ( $M = 3.486$ ,  $SD = 7.12$ ), but the total score for the unattractive applicant was even higher ( $M = 3.644$ ,  $SD = .098$ ) and the opposite of that hypothesized.

## Discussion

Degree of attractiveness produced no significant differences in the participants' inferences of a job applicant's personal attributes. Results of this study were not consistent with previous research. In the current study participants were asked to look at pictures of the applicants as opposed to meeting with them in person. In previous studies participants met with the applicants in person. This variable may have affected the current study in that the attractiveness manipulation may have been less effective for the photos selected than face-to-face exposure. Also, in the current study there were only female participants, and it is possible that they discriminated less between female applicants than male participants would have. Future studies should conduct in-person interviews and have an even number of men and women participate.

Even though results of this study were not significant, the "what is beautiful is good" hypothesis is probably still valid. The current study's procedure may not have represented a valid test of the hypothesis for the reasons stated above. In addition, the photos may have been too similar for participants to get a good idea of the degree of the applicant's attractiveness. There has already been extensive research on this topic and there will continue to be much more in the future. If this study were repeated and these limitations overcome, it is more likely that the hypothesis would be confirmed.

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