



Beauty stereotypes in social norm enforcement The effect of attractiveness on third-party punishment and reward



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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 31 March 2015

Received in revised form 9 September 2015

Accepted 14 September 2015

Available online 25 September 2015

Keywords:

Social norm enforcement

Third-party punishment and reward

Strong reciprocity

Attractiveness

Beauty stereotypes

Stereotype consistency/inconsistency

TPRG

ABSTRACT

The present study analyzes how attractiveness affects social norm enforcement in a context of third-party punishment and reward. The authors developed a Third-Party Punishment and Reward Game (TPRG) that consisted of two steps. First, subjects observed a short Public Goods Game between two fictitious players; afterwards they had the opportunity to punish or reward either one or both players. Interfering in the game was costly for the subjects. The eight rounds of the game comprised scenarios that were either *stereotype-consistent* (attractive cooperators and unattractive free-riders) or *stereotype-inconsistent* (attractive free-riders and unattractive cooperators). Subjects' emotional responses to each fictitious player were registered. Participants (N = 197) were found to punish attractive free-riders less severely than unattractive ones, whereas attractive cooperators were rewarded more than unattractive ones. Our present findings may support a so-called “beauty priority”: attractiveness was highly valued by participants even among players who cheated. Furthermore, the intensity of subjects' emotional responses reflected the amounts of punishment and reward they allocated to players. The above results led to the conclusion that stereotype-consistent scenarios evoke more extreme emotions and interventions than stereotype-inconsistent ones.

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1. Introduction

1.1. Cooperation and punishment

Reciprocal relationships in human groups are consolidated by consensual social norms. The ability to follow norms and punish defectors enables minimization of interpersonal conflicts as well as generalization and sustention of cooperation in the group (Fehr, Fischbacher, & Gächter, 2002). The theory of so-called *strong reciprocity* suggests that people are basically ready to cooperate with others and they are willing, even at their own expenses, to punish defectors who violate norms and reward those who fulfill norms above expectations (Gintis, Bowles, Boyd, & Fehr, 2003).

The Third-Party Punishment Game (TPG) was developed for studying strong reciprocity. The game involves two players who play Prisoner's Dilemma or Dictator Game while a third party observes the game (Fehr et al., 2002). Several studies demonstrated that observers (third-parties) would respond extremely sensitively to violations of the cooperation and distribution norms (Fehr et al., 2002; Fehr & Fischbacher, 2004; Fehr & Gächter, 2000; Turillo, Folger, Lavelle, Umphress, & Gee, 2002). The former norm requires people to engage

in mutually beneficial social exchanges with one another; the latter stands for individuals' concerns for fairness (Fehr & Fischbacher, 2004; Turillo et al., 2002). In these studies, subjects were willing to punish defectors and reward cooperators at their own expenses even though they were told that these costs will never be repaid to them. The authors suggest that interventions were motivated by *strong negative emotions* toward the defectors (Fehr & Fischbacher, 2004; Gintis et al., 2003).

1.2. Social attractiveness

While people show considerable interindividual differences as to whom they find attractive, researchers have identified features of the human face which are universally preferred across cultures in potential sexual partners (Little, Jones, & DeBruine, 2011; Rhodes, 2006). Beyond mate choice, facial attractiveness has a strong impact on people's social success. In line with the “*what is beautiful is good*” stereotype – initially proposed by Dion, Berscheid, and Walster (1972) – social psychologists have shown that people tend to attribute positive psychological traits to attractive individuals, including social and intellectual competence, dominance, and a predisposition to cooperate in social dilemma situations (Andreoni & Petrie, 2008; Fink, Neave, Manning, & Grammer, 2006). Due to these attributions, attractive adults are more likely to receive help and get higher salaries than less attractive people (Keating, 2003). Studies investigating the neural responses to facial attractiveness have demonstrated that people experience more positive emotions

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(shown as a higher activation in the brain's reward circuitry) while looking at physically more attractive compared to unattractive faces (Hahn & Perrett, 2014). In a similar vein, Griffin and Langlois (2006) revealed the effects of the stereotype “what is ugly is bad”: subjects found individuals with an unattractive face less sociable, altruistic, and intelligent compared to more attractive individuals.

Generally, in reciprocal relationships more attractive people are judged more cooperative and more trustworthy than others (Andreoni & Petrie, 2008). Results of experimental games demonstrate that players placed in a social dilemma are more likely to cooperate and beginners allocate larger amounts of money to physically attractive players than to less attractive ones. However, this so-called “*beauty premium*” does not necessarily earn victory for more attractive players at the end of the game (Wilson & Eckel, 2006). Attractive players who do not prove trustworthy, that is, who show no or minimal cooperation, are subject to more severe punishment (“*beauty penalty*”) than less attractive trustees who failed to reciprocate (Wilson & Eckel, 2006).

1.3. Norm-enforcing emotions

During human evolution, norm-enforcement behavior might have had several direct and indirect benefits despite its obvious costs. Such benefits, for example, are gaining a good reputation within the community, attracting cooperating individuals' attention, and deterring defectors (Barclay, 2004; Bereczkei, Birkás, & Kerekes, 2010). From an evolutionary perspective, altruistic punishment and reward are viewed as costly signals, which reveal one's fitness and ample resources (West, El Mouden, & Gardner, 2011).

In the above mentioned experimental games, subjects chose to punish defectors and reward cooperators despite researchers excluding opportunities to gain a good reputation or to exercise reciprocity (players met only once). Recent work of Delton, Krasnow, Cosmides and Tooby (2011) provides an explanation for this seemingly “irrational” generosity. For most of their existence humans have lived in small hunter-gatherer tribes characterized by a large number of repeated encounters. This resulted in evolved cognitive biases that favor cooperation over defection even in one-shot interactions.

A more proximate level explanation of norm-enforcing behavior comes from Trivers (1971) who suggested that emotions like gratitude or anger (*moralistic aggression*) play a vital role in regulating social interactions. In other words, an individual's decision of meting out punishments to cheaters or allocating rewards to cooperators is likely to be grounded in both rational and emotional mental processes. In fact, Fehr and Gächter (2000) have demonstrated that the intensity of the experienced anger depended on the degree of defection. The more salient the norm violation, the more intense the anger that subjects experienced; thus they allocated more severe punishments (Fehr & Gächter, 2000). In the same vein, the more intense the subjects' positive emotional experience, the larger rewards they allocated to cooperators (de Kwaadsteniet, Rijkhoff, & van Dijk, 2013).

1.4. Hypotheses

In this study we focused on the extent of influence that came to bear on “unaffected third parties” from the behavior of individuals who varied in attractiveness and cooperation. Previous studies have shown that i) people react with intense negative emotions (i.e. anger) to the violation of social norms and are willing to inflict severe punishments on defectors even at their own costs (Fehr & Gächter, 2000), whereas they experience positive emotions (e.g. gratitude or contentment) and allocate rewards when observing cooperative behavior (de Kwaadsteniet et al., 2013); ii) subjects tend to attribute more advantageous personality traits to physically attractive individuals and experience more positive emotions toward them compared to unattractive faces (Fink et al., 2006; Griffin & Langlois, 2006; Hahn & Perrett, 2014). Based on these findings, two major predictions were tested:

Prediction 1. In general, subjects are predicted to allocate more severe punishments to free-riders than to cooperators. Furthermore, due to positive evaluations attributed to beauty, participants are predicted to inflict lower punishments to more attractive free-riders, compared to less attractive ones. Similarly, more attractive cooperators are expected to receive higher rewards than less attractive ones.

Prediction 2. The degree of punishment and reward may be mediated by the emotional response evoked by the affected players. Due to positive attributions concerning physically attractive individuals and negative attributions concerning unattractive individuals, stereotype-consistent scenarios (attractive cooperators and unattractive free-riders) are expected to evoke more intense emotions in subjects than stereotype-inconsistent ones.

The computer game developed for the present study is similar to those applied in studies conducted by Charness, Cobo-Reyes and Jiménez (2007) as well as de Kwaadsteniet et al. (2013). Namely, the game is used to study not only the role of punishment in decision making processes but also the targets and amounts of reward chosen by subjects in social dilemmas. As opposed to the above studies, however, third-party interventions in this study are related to physical attractiveness and not to environmental predictability (de Kwaadsteniet et al., 2013) or trusting behavior (Charness et al., 2007). According to cooperation and attractiveness, players can be sorted into two categories: stereotype-consistent and stereotype-inconsistent types. The former category includes attractive cooperators and unattractive defectors, while the latter includes unattractive cooperators and attractive cheaters.

Another important new condition introduced in this study is that players observed by third parties play the Public Goods Game (and not the Trust Game or Investment Game) which represents a more complex type of interpersonal relationships. Public Goods Game was used so that subjects would primarily base their decisions on players' contributions to the common good, that is, subjects would consider the cooperation norm rather than the distribution norm (Fehr & Fischbacher, 2004; Turillo et al., 2002). In sum, this study investigated the effects of attractiveness on norm-enforcement behavior and emotions by means of an experimental computer game, the Third-Party Punishment and Reward Game (TPRG) developed by the authors.

2. Method

2.1. Sample

The sample included 197 students of the humanities and sciences faculties of the University of Pécs, Hungary, of which 93 were male (aged between 18 and 31; M age = 21.74 years; SD = 2.32) and 104 were female (aged between 18 and 29; M age = 20.59 years; SD = 1.84). All participants were Caucasians and heterosexual. Participation was voluntary and anonymous. Subjects were financially rewarded for participation with an amount varying between 1000 HUF and 5000 HUF (Hungarian Forint: approximately \$4–20), according to their performance in the game.

2.2. Stimulus materials and manipulation check

Sixteen portraits were included in the stimulus materials which were selected from a total of 89 male and female portraits of Caucasian adults displaying neutral expressions borrowed from the database of a previous study (see Meskó, 2007). An important selection criterion was that subjects should not recognize any of the presented faces. Attractiveness and trustworthiness of each face was rated on a 7-point scale by 48 (7 Caucasian males, 41 Caucasian females) B.A. students in psychology at the University of Pécs, Hungary. Based on the mean

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