

ORIGINAL RESEARCH—DESIRE

Perception of Men's Beauty and Attractiveness by Women with Low Sexual Desire

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ABSTRACT

Introduction. Despite the high prevalence of hypoactive sexual desire disorder (HSDD), especially among women, this sexual disorder remains poorly understood. Among the multiple factors possibly involved in HSDD, particularities in the cognitive evaluations of social stimuli need to be better characterized. Especially, beauty and attractiveness judgments, two dimensions of interpersonal perception that are related but differ on their underlying motivational aspects, may vary according to the level of sexual desire.

Aim. The main goal of this study was to investigate whether women with and without HSDD differ in their evaluations of beauty and attractiveness of men's faces and voices.

Methods. Young women from the general population (controls, $n = 16$) and with HSDD (patients, $n = 16$) took part in the study. They were presented with a series of neutral/nonerotic voices and faces of young men from the GENEVA Faces And Voices database.

Main Outcome Measures. Ratings of beauty (i.e., assessments of aesthetic pleasure) and of attractiveness (i.e., assessments of the personal propensity to feel attracted to someone) and the frequency to which the participants pressed a key to see or listen to each stimulus again were the main outcome measures.

Results. Ratings of attractiveness were lower than ratings of beauty in both groups of women. The dissociation between beauty and attractiveness was larger in women with HSDD than in control participants. Patients gave lower attractiveness ratings than the controls and replayed the stimuli significantly less often.

Conclusion. These results suggest that women with HSDD are characterized by specific alterations of the motivational component of men's perception, very early in the process of interpersonal relationships. Our findings have significant implications, both in better understanding the specific cognitive processes underlying hypoactive sexual desire and more largely the evaluative processes involved in human mate choice. **Ferdenzi C, Delplanque S, Vorontsova-Wenger O, Pool E, Bianchi-Demicheli F, and Sander D. Perception of men's beauty and attractiveness by women with low sexual desire. J Sex Med 2015;12:946–955.**

Key Words. Sexual Desire; Mate Choice; Attractiveness; Face and Voice Perception; Motivation

Introduction

Hypoactive sexual desire disorder (HSDD) can be defined as “diminished feelings of sexual interest or desire, absent sexual thoughts or fantasies and a lack of responsive desire. Motivations [...] for attempting to have sexual arousal are

scarce or absent. The lack of interest is considered to be beyond the normative lessening with life cycle and relationship duration” [1]. It is one of the most common sexual dysfunctions in women and has a relatively high prevalence in the population (low desire: about 20–30% of the female European population; HSDD: about 10% [2]). Because it can

severely impair quality of life, it represents a frequent motive for clinical consultation [3,4]. This sexual disorder is believed to have multifactorial causes (psychological, relational, environmental, and biological) (e.g., Bitzer et al. [5]). Despite the fact that attentional and affective processing of sexual stimuli in HSDD is increasingly studied at the behavior and brain levels [6,7], the role of motivational mechanisms in this sexual dysfunction [5] remains poorly understood. In addition, studies investigating HSDD mechanisms often preferentially focus on physiological and subjective sexual response to erotic stimuli. However, cognitive aspects involving person perception in general (i.e., in nonerotic context) need to be further explored in women with HSDD in order to establish whether the response to male stimuli would deteriorate in a more general fashion than merely in explicit sexual situations. The aim of the present study was therefore to investigate how nonerotic male stimuli were perceived by heterosexual women with and without HSDD.

More specifically, we investigated whether HSDD is characterized by a general impairment of the assessment of a man's physical appearance (i.e., the pleasure elicited by looking at or listening to that man) or by a more specific alteration of judgments involving motivational aspects (like the propensity to feel attracted to that man). There is accumulating evidence in humans and animals suggesting that pleasure (i.e., *liking*) and motivation (i.e., *wanting*) represent two distinct components of reward processing. They are usually strongly correlated, but can be dissociated under some particular circumstances [8]. Indeed, it has been suggested that extremely strong desires that lead to pathological reward consumption (e.g., drug addiction) are driven by an increase of motivation without a parallel increase of pleasure [9]. Individual differences in the processing of rewarding stimuli, such as faces or erotic pictures, may underlie variations in the intensity of sexual desire [10] from extremely low desire as in HSDD to extremely strong desire. Moreover, sexual liking and wanting have been shown to be distinct constructs in a nonclinical population [11], but their role in extreme variations of sexual desire such as HSDD remains unexplored.

The distinction between aesthetic pleasure and motivation elicited by nonerotic stimuli (female faces) has been highlighted, for example, in a study with heterosexual men who, despite the fact that they found beautiful male faces as much aesthetically pleasing as beautiful female faces, displayed

more effort (e.g., motivation, measured via a "keypress" procedure) to increase female pictures' viewing time [12]. Aesthetic pleasure and motivation can also be measured with simple rating scales quantifying perceived beauty and attractiveness, respectively. Indeed, despite the fact that the terms "attractiveness" and "prettiness" or "beauty" or "cuteness" are often used indifferently in the popular language as well as by scholars, they are far from being equivalent. One can find someone beautiful without being personally attracted to him or her. This is, a fortiori, the case for a person viewing someone sexually incompatible with his or her sexual orientation (a heterosexual male toward another male, for instance). Inversely, as advocated by David Perrett [13], one can be attracted to someone who is not beautiful. Judgments of beauty reflect aesthetic pleasure triggered by the features of the face or the body, whereas judgments of attractiveness reflect "the personal desire to approach and be with someone" (Perrett [13], p. 231). This distinction is corroborated by nonverbal cues, as visual attention is stronger toward more attractive but not toward more beautiful faces [14]. A behavioral setting involving beauty and attractiveness evaluations thus seems adequate as a first attempt to investigate aesthetic pleasure and motivation associated with nonerotic male stimuli in heterosexual women with and without HSDD.

In this study, to distinguish between aesthetic pleasure and motivation for a potential male sexual partner, we collected women's beauty and attractiveness judgments of men. As vision and audition are two major channels in social interactions, male faces and voices were used as stimuli to be evaluated. Beauty judgments reflected the women's evaluation of what is generally agreed to be judged as beautiful or pleasant, whereas attractiveness referred to the participants' own propensity to be attracted to the man for a relationship of short or long duration. Long- and short-term contexts were used because they are known to be significant sources of variation in women's judgments of men [15]. Participants were also allowed to press a key to repeat stimulus presentation ("keypress" paradigm), which was used as a behavioral measure of the motivation to see/listen to the stimuli. Women with HSDD were compared with women without HSDD, both groups being similar in terms of age, contraception, and relationship status (factors influencing face and voice perception [15–18]). We hypothesized that beauty and attractiveness judgments of a man would not necessarily be

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