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Brief research report

Perceptions of plagiarisers: The influence of target physical attractiveness, transgression severity, and sex on attributions of guilt and punishment

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ABSTRACT

The attractiveness-leniency effect (ALE) suggests that physically attractive targets are less likely to be perceived as guilty compared to less attractive targets. Here, we tested the ALE in relation to attributions of students who have committed plagiarism. British adults ($N = 165$) were shown one of eight vignette-photograph pairings varying in target sex (female/male), physical attractiveness (high/low), and transgression severity (serious/minor), and provided attributions of guilt and severity of punishment. Analyses of variance revealed significant interactions between attractiveness and transgression severity for both dependent measures. Attractive targets were perceived as guiltier and deserving of more severe punishments in the serious transgression condition, but there was no significant difference between attractive and less attractive targets in the minor transgression condition. These results are discussed in terms of a reverse attribution bias, in which attractive individuals are judged more negatively when they fail to live up to higher standards of conduct.

1. Introduction

In their classic study, Dion, Berscheid, and Walster (1972) demonstrated that physically attractive individuals tend to be perceived more positively (e.g., more positive personality traits, lead better lives) than less attractive individuals. This led Dion et al. (1972, p. 285) to suggest that, in people's perceptions of other, "what is beautiful is good." This effect has since come to be known as the *attractiveness bias* and is supported through meta-analytic findings (Feingold, 1992; Langlois et al., 2000), which indicate that physically attractive individuals are ascribed a range of positive traits including high trustworthiness and honesty (Patzer, 2006; Swami & Furnham, 2008). Consistent with this perspective, both field (e.g., Downs & Lyons, 1991; Stewart, 1985) and mock-juror studies (for a review, see Mazzella & Feingold, 1994) point to an attractiveness-leniency effect, such that physically attractive defendants are less likely to perceived as guilty compared to less attractiveness defendants, and also receive more lenient sentences or punishments. In addition, one review of the literature has suggested that target sex does not reliably influence the attractiveness-leniency effect (Eagly, Ashmore, Makhijani, & Longo, 1991).

However, other research has suggested that the attractiveness-leniency effect is moderated under certain conditions. For example, the effect has been found to decrease in strength when the crime is seen to be related to physical attractiveness (e.g., swindling; Sigall & Ostrove, 1975; Smith & Hed, 1979) or when jurors are allowed to deliberate on the guilt of a defendant (Patry, 2008). In addition, studies consistently show that the attractiveness-leniency effect is attenuated or even reversed with greater severity of the crime (e.g., Beckham, Spray, & Pietz, 2007; Downs & Lyons, 1991). Some scholars attribute this to a "reverse attribution bias"; that is, when a defendant is physically attractive but is accused of a serious offense, they are perceived as having violated the assumption that what-is-beautiful-is-good. This, in turn, results in an "overcorrection" in attributions that manifests in terms of more negative judgements and harsher punishment (Abwender & Hough, 2001; Mazzella & Feingold, 1994). A related possibility is that attractive persons are also perceived as vain, egotistical, selfish, or feel entitled—what

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Cash and Janda (1984) termed the "what is beautiful is self-centred bias".

In the present study, we sought to examine the attractiveness-leniency effect in terms of academic dishonesty (plagiarism). In so doing, we extended the available research to a transgression that has not been previously been the focus of studies, but that has serious consequences for institutions of higher education (Tennant & Duggan, 2008). More specifically, we examined the impact of target sex, physical attractiveness, and transgression severity on perceptions of guilt and punishment decision-making. Based on previous studies (Mazzella & Feingold, 1994), we hypothesised that physical attractiveness and transgression severity would interact to influence outcomes, such that an attractiveness-leniency effect would be seen for minor plagiarism but would disappear for serious transgression. Further, based on previous findings (Eagly et al., 1991), we did not expect target sex to interact with either physical attractiveness or transgression severity to shape outcomes.

2. Method

2.1. Participants

Participants were 71 women and 94 men from the United Kingdom (U.K.), who ranged in age from 18 to 60 years ($M = 24.08$, $SD = 7.70$). The majority (74.2%) were of British White ancestry and, in terms of educational qualifications, 61.3% had an undergraduate degree, 19.0% had a postgraduate degree, and the remainder were still in full-time higher education.

2.2. Materials

2.2.1. Facial stimuli

The stimuli consisted of four photographic and standardised (equivalent size, head angle, and neutral facial expression) images of faces obtained from the Chicago Face Database (CFD; Ma, Correll, & Wittenbrink, 2015). From this database, we selected two images of White men (WM-004 and WM-236 in the CFD) and two images of White women (WF-022 and WF-229). Within each sex category, we selected, based on physical attractiveness ratings (1 = *Not at all*, 7 = *Extremely*) provided by Ma et al. (2015, N = 087), one image to represent the high attractiveness condition (female stimulus $M = 5.09$, male stimulus $M = 4.66$) and one image to represent the low attractiveness condition (female stimulus $M = 2.68$, male stimulus $M = 2.04$).

2.2.2. Vignettes

Participants were presented with a brief vignette describing a case of academic dishonesty, which we designed to be reflective of a typical coursework-based degree programme in the U.K. The vignettes were paired with a photograph that participants were told had been taken from student records. The vignettes varied in terms of the severity of the alleged transgression and in terms of target sex: "This student is studying at a university in the United Kingdom. As part of her/his final year, s/he had to complete a 10,000-word dissertation. This dissertation is worth a quarter of her/his mark in this academic year. S/he submitted the dissertation on time, before the deadline. It is customary practice to run all dissertations through a plagiarism-detection programme. The result showed that 20%/70% of the dissertation had been directly copied off another piece of work." Following presentation of the vignettes, participants were asked to rate the extent to which they believed targets were guilty of plagiarism on a 7-point scale (1 = *Not at all guilty*, 7 = *Definitely guilty*) and how severe the punishment should be (1 = *Very lenient*, 7 = *Very severe*). The order of presentation of these items was counter-balanced for each participant.

2.3. Procedures

Ethics permissions for this study was obtained from the departmental ethics panel at University College London. The second author used an opportunistic recruitment strategy to solicit participation in the study via social networking sites between November 2016 and January 2017. The study was advertised as a project on plagiarism and was limited to residents of the U.K. of adult age and those who had completed or were currently enrolled on a U.K. higher education degree programme. The latter inclusion criterion was used to ensure that all participants would be minimally familiar with the issue being investigated in the present study. Those who agreed to participate were sent a link to the questionnaire, which was hosted on Qualtrics, and had to confirm that they were completing the study on a desktop computer (rather than tablet or smartphone) to ensure minimal standardisation across participants. All participants provided digital informed consent and were randomly assigned to view one of eight vignettes. The study, therefore, used a between-subjects design, in which participants saw one of eight vignettes paired with a photograph of a purported student who had committed a plagiarism offence as part of an unnamed degree course. Once they had provided vignette-based ratings, participants were asked to provide their basic demographics (sex, age, and ethnicity). The questionnaire took approximately 5 min to complete. All participants took part on a voluntary basis and were not remunerated. The questionnaire was anonymous and all participants received debrief information at completion (Table 1).

3. Results

We initially ran 2 (target sex: women vs. men) × 2 (attractiveness: high vs. low) × 2 (transgression severity: high vs low) × 2 (participant sex: women vs. men) analyses of variance (ANOVAs), with perceptions of guilt and punishment, respectively, as the dependent variables. However, participant sex never reached significant either as main effects or in interactions (all $Fs < 2.82$, all $ps > .095$); for the sake of parsimony, we report on the 2 × 2 × 2 ANOVAs without participant sex. The ANOVA with guilt attributions showed that there was no significant three-way interaction, $F(1, 157) = 1.79$, $p = .183$, $\eta_p^2 = .01$, nor were there significant two-way interactions between target sex and attractiveness, $F(1, 157) = 0.16$, $p = .689$, $\eta p2 <_p^2 < .01$, or between sex and transgression severity, $F(1, 157) = 0.01$, $p = .913$, $\eta_p^2 < .01$. There was, however, a significant two-way interaction between attractiveness and transgression severity, $F(1, 157) = 10.56$, $p = .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .06$. Tests of simple effects showed that, in the low transgression condition, there was no significant difference in attributions of guilt between attractive and less attractive targets, $t(78) = 0.63$, $p = .529$, $d = 0.14$, CI = −0.97–0.50. In contrast, in the high transgression condition, attractive targets were rated as significantly more guilty than less attractive targets, $t(83) = 5.29$, $p < .001$, $d = 1.16$, CI = 0.71–1.55. There were also significant main effects of transgression severity, $F(1, 157) = 43.87$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .21$, and attractiveness, $F(1, 157) = 4.65$, $p = .033$, $\eta_p^2 = .03$, but not of sex, $F(1, 157) = 1.64$, $p = .202$, $\eta_p^2 < .01$.

The ANOVA with punishment indicated no significant three-way interaction, $F(1, 157) = 0.01$, $p = .926$, $\eta_p^2 < .01$, and no significant two-way interactions between target sex and attractiveness, $F(1, 157) = 0.54$, $p = .462$, $\eta_p^2 < .01$, or between sex and transgression severity, $F(1, 157) = 3.67$, $p = .057$, $\eta_p^2 = .02$. There was, conversely, a significant two-way interaction between attractiveness and transgression severity, $F(1, 157) = 8.01$, $p = .005$, $\eta_p^2 = .05$. In the low transgression condition, there was no significant difference in judgements of punishment between attractive and less attractive targets, $t(78) = 1.98$, $p = .052$, $d = 0.44$, CI = −1.29-0.01. On the other