

Brief research report

Personality information: Does it influence attractiveness ratings of various body sizes?

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Abstract

In the present study, the influence of personality information on attractiveness ratings of different body sizes was examined. Specifically, participants were presented with either no personality information, negative information, or positive information about a hypothetical female target and asked to rate the smallest and largest figure that they would consider attractive for her using a figure rating scale. Consistent with the study hypotheses: (1) participants chose a wider range of figures as attractive for a female described to have a positive personality when compared to the range chosen when no personality information was provided; (2) females selected wider attractive ranges than males; and (3) other participant characteristics (i.e., physical appearance anxiety and body mass) were found to predict attractive ranges selected by participants. These findings may have implications for the treatment of body-image disturbance, as the findings suggest that personality, rather than appearance alone, may be a factor in perceptions of attractiveness of various body sizes.

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Introduction

The physical attractiveness stereotype, in which attractive individuals are assumed to possess positive personality traits, has received extensive empirical support (cf. Feingold, 1992). Consistent with this stereotype, personality characteristics also have been attributed to individuals based on their body size and shape (Greenleaf, Starks, Gomez, Chamliiss, & Martin, 2004; Hildebrandt & Walker, 2006). In particular, research has indicated that raters tend to use unfavorable terms to describe obese (e.g., slow, lazy, unfriendly) and thin (e.g., boring, stupid)

figures, whereas middleweight figures are generally rated in a positive manner (e.g., friendly, funny, motivated) (Butler, Ryckman, Thornton, & Bouchard, 1993; Davis-Pyles, Conger, & Conger, 1990; Furnham, Petrides, & Constantinides, 2005; Greenleaf et al., 2004). Overall, the existence of the physical attractiveness stereotype is well-supported, as both attractiveness and body size appear to influence assumptions made about one's personality characteristics and interpersonal functioning.

Although research has focused on the influence of attractiveness on perceptions of personality, evidence also exists to support a somewhat opposite notion—that personality information may influence the perceived attractiveness of an individual (e.g., Kniffin & Wilson, 2004). This line of research may be a relevant topic of interpersonal attractiveness, as rating the attractiveness of a target in the absence of other information is limited to situations in which unknown individuals are being

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visually examined for the first time. Therefore, only physical appearance can be used to rate attractiveness. However, in interpersonal relationships, individuals typically receive personality information, which may provide a context for the evaluation of attractiveness. Consistent with this notion, research has found that positive personality information increases perceptions of physical attractiveness of those being rated, and positive personality traits have been found to be rated as a more important quality than physical attractiveness for a potential long-term romantic partner (Fletcher, Tither, O'Loughlin, Friesen, & Overall, 2004; Friedman, Riggio, & Casella, 1988; Hanko, Master, & Sabini, 2004; Kniffin & Wilson, 2004; Snyder, Berscheid, & Glick, 1985). Overall, perceptions appear to be based on the information available, and when provided, personality information may influence targets' attractiveness ratings.

Research examining the association between attractiveness ratings and personality is particularly relevant when considering wide-spread body-image dissatisfaction experienced by a majority of women (cf. Thompson, Heinberg, Altabe, & Tantleff-Dunn, 1999). Many women experience a discrepancy between their current and ideal body weight, and this discrepancy, which plays a role in body-image disturbance, is a significant predictor of eating disorder symptoms (Corning, Krumm, & Smitham, 2006; Forestell, Humphrey, & Stewart, 2004). Interestingly, women with negative body images have been found to also judge *others* against societal standards of beauty (Forestell et al., 2004). Although research on ideal body sizes has examined how rater characteristics (e.g., dietary restraint) may affect perceptions of attractiveness, few studies have examined the characteristics of the target figure that may alter this ideal or increase the range of body sizes that are considered attractive.

The focus of the current study was to explore the possible influence that personality information may have on perceptions of physical attractiveness by focusing on the attractiveness of a range of body sizes in the context of personality information. Based on the above discussed influence of personality information on attractiveness ratings, the first hypothesis was that personality information, positive and negative, would influence attractiveness ratings of a hypothetical target. Specifically, it was hypothesized that, when viewed in the context of positive personality information, raters would move away from society's thin ideal, and a target could have a larger and/or smaller body sizes but still be considered attractive. In other words, a wider range of body sizes would be considered attractive for a target with a positive

personality than the range chosen when no personality information was given. Further, it was expected that negative information would influence people to use more stringent standards in choosing attractive body sizes, and subsequently a more restricted range.

The second hypothesis was that rater characteristics would influence attractive range ratings. Consistent with previous body image and attractiveness research, it was hypothesized that males would generally use more narrow/stringent attractiveness standards than females when rating female figures (Fallon & Rozin, 1985; Feingold, 1990). In other words, males were expected to choose a more restricted range for attractiveness ratings. Consistent with previous research, it also was hypothesized that other rater characteristics, including rater body image and body mass, would influence ratings of female figures (Forestell et al., 2004).

Methods

Participants

Measures were completed by 335 undergraduates at a large state university in the Southeastern United States (115 men and 220 women). The mean age for participants was 18.94 years ($SD = 3.18$). Participants were recruited from undergraduate psychology courses and given extra credit for their participation. The sample was 80.5% European American, 7.4% Hispanic/Latino, 4.8% African American, 4.4% Asian American, 0.3% Native American, and 1.8% described their ethnic background as "other."

Measures and materials

Contour Drawing Figure Rating Scale (CDFRS)

This scale consists of nine male and nine female figures, ranging from thin to obese in increasing increments; the CDFRS has demonstrated adequate psychometric properties (Thompson & Gray, 1995). Participants typically are asked to identify the figure that represents their current body size, their ideal body size, and the figure preferred by the opposite sex (Altabe & Thompson, 1992). For the purpose of this study, participants were asked to rate the largest and smallest female figure that they considered "attractive." Values range from 1 (smallest figure) to 9 (largest figure).

Physical Appearance State and Trait Anxiety Scale (PASTAS)

The PASTAS is a self-report measure of state and trait anxiety for eight weight-related and eight

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