



You must have been a beautiful baby: Ratings of infant facial attractiveness fail to predict ratings of adult attractiveness

Marissa A. Harrison^{a,*}, Jennifer C. Shortall^b, Franco Dispenza^c, Gordon G. Gallup Jr.^d

^a Psychology Program, Penn State Harrisburg, Middletown, PA, USA

^b Department of Counseling, Psychology, and Special Education, Duquesne University, Pittsburgh, PA, USA

^c Counseling and Psychological Services, Georgia State University, USA

^d Psychology Department, University at Albany, State University of New York, USA

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ABSTRACT

Facial attractiveness has been studied extensively, but little research has examined the stability of facial attractiveness of individuals across different stages of development. We conducted a study examining the relationship between facial attractiveness in infants (age 24 months and under) and the same individuals as young adults (age 16–18 years) using infant and adult photographs from high school yearbooks. Contrary to expectations, independent raters' assessments of infant facial attractiveness did not correlate with adult facial attractiveness. These results are discussed in terms of the adaptive function of heightened attractiveness in infancy, which likely evolved to elicit and maintain parental care.

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People spend a disproportionate amount of time looking at faces, and facial perception has been cited as “the most highly developed visual skill in humans” with extensive neural circuitry devoted to such processing (Haxby, Hoffman, & Gobbini, 2000, p. 223). Many levels of information are embedded in faces, such as sex, race, age, and identity, and these attributes are quickly assessed by observers (Dupuis-Roy, Fortin, Fiset, & Gosselin, 2009; Ekman, 1978; Zebrowitz & Montepare, 2008). Facial features further provide information on a target's intellectual status, such as mental retardation (Streissguth, Herman, & Smith, 1978), and mental health, as in the case of schizophrenia (Ekman & Fridlund, 1987). Moreover, bilateral facial symmetry, an indicator of the ability to resist perturbations during prenatal development, has been shown to be a reliable, objective indicator of health and longevity (Scheib, Gangestad, & Thornhill, 1999; Shackelford & Larsen, 1999).

Judgments of facial attractiveness tend to hold up cross-culturally (Bernstein, Lin, & McClellan, 1982; Cunningham, Roberts, Barbee, Druen, & Wu, 1995; Iliffe, 1960; Langlois & Roggman, 1990; Zebrowitz, Montepare, & Lee, 1993). As such, facial attractiveness likely serves an adaptive function and has been a key point in sexual selection (Fink & Penton-Voak, 2002; Grammer & Thornhill, 1994). Gangestad, Thornhill, and Yeo (1994) found that facial attractiveness predicted developmental stability, suggesting that facial attractiveness is an honest signal of mate value cuing genetic quality. Additionally, many studies (e.g., Little, Jones, DeBruine, & Feinberg, 2008; Perrett et al., 1999; Scheib et al., 1999) have shown positive associations between facial symmetry and ratings of attractiveness.

* Corresponding author at: Penn State Harrisburg, Olmsted W311, 777 W. Harrisburg Pike, Middletown, PA, 17057, USA. Tel.: +1 717 948 6068.
E-mail address: mah52@psu.edu (M.A. Harrison).

Whereas facial attractiveness serves as an ultimate signal for good genes, social psychologists have shown that people subscribe to a “what is beautiful is good” philosophy, and attractive individuals are rated as more intelligent, more social, kinder, better friends, and better romantic partners (Dion, Bersheid, & Walster, 1972). It is likely that this “halo effect” (Nisbett & Wilson, 1977) serves the ultimate motive of finding a good mate.

Perceptions of physical attractiveness and its associated attributes are not limited to adults. Infants favor attractive adult faces and show positive affect toward attractive females (Langlois, Roggman, & Resier-Danner, 1990). These effects appear reciprocal because people look at attractive infants longer and smile more while looking at them (Hildebrandt & Fitzgerald, 1978). Even infants look longer at photographs of attractive infants (Van Duuren, Kendell-Scott, & Stark, 2006). Hildebrandt-Karraker and Stern (1990) reported that participants gave more positive ascriptions, such as being more sociable, easier to care for, and more competent, to attractive infants. Similarly, Stephan and Langlois (1984) demonstrated that the “beauty is good” stereotype was salient across ratings of infant appearance, with attractive infants being rated as smart, likable, and good, whereas unattractive babies were judged to cause parental problems. Stephan and Langlois suggested that such behavioral expectations are “strong and consistent” shortly after birth for attractive and unattractive infants.

The question is if facial attractiveness is indicative of good genes, are beautiful babies more likely to become beautiful adults? That is, does a person's level of attractiveness remain relatively constant over time (Caspi & Bern, 1990; Zebrowitz, Olson, & Hoffman, 1993)? Pittinger, Mark, and Johnson (1989) found that individual attractiveness was moderately stable from childhood to adulthood. Similarly, Sussman, Mueser, Grau, and Yarnold (1983) and Alley (1993) determined that facial attractiveness is somewhat stable from approximately 5 years of age to early adulthood. Further, Zebrowitz and colleagues (1993) found stability for individuals in a large sample of targets from about age 10 to adulthood, with a decrease in attractiveness as age increased in both sexes. Interestingly, however, they noted that appearance at an earlier age was “by no means a perfect predictor of appearance at the next” (p. 464). Although these studies provided evidence for stability of attractiveness, none examined attractiveness from infancy to adulthood.

In the present studies we examined the stability of facial attractiveness from infancy (24 months and younger) to early adulthood (16–18 years of age) as assessed by independent raters. As most previous research has found some stability in attractiveness, we expected that ratings of an infant's attractiveness would predict ratings of the target person's adult attractiveness. Further, because previous studies have shown men take less interest in infants than do women (Gaulin, 1980; Turke, 1997), we anticipated that women would assign higher ratings of attractiveness to infants.

1. Study 1

1.1. Method

1.1.1. Materials

All procedures were approved by the local Institutional Review Board. Following protocols from previous studies (see Henderson & Anglin, 2003), photographs of infants and adults were obtained from high school yearbooks dating from 1977 to 1993 from three different US regions. To maximize facial visibility, we did not include photographs of babies wearing blankets around their heads or head adornments, adults with facial hair, and individuals wearing hats or glasses. The stimulus material consisted of both an infant photograph and an adult photograph of the same individual, and the resulting target sample consisted of 40 individuals (20 males, 20 females). All of the adult photographs belonged to White students that were high school seniors, making them approximately 18 years old. Since there were not always data for age, independent raters ($n = 10$) estimated the age of each infant photograph. Infants were judged to be between the ages of 3 and 18 months old. The inter-rater reliability of age assessment was moderately high (Cronbach's $\alpha = .83$).

The photographs were scanned using a CanoScanN670U scanner. Because all of the infant photographs were presented in gray scale in yearbooks, all adult images originally presented in color were changed to gray scale. Each color photograph was homogeneously modified using the same hue, lightness, and saturation levels with Adobe Photoshop (version 7.0). The pictures were also resized to approximately 2.6 in. $\times$ 3.6 in. for better visibility. Each image was cropped from ear to ear and from hairline to chin in order to minimize the effects of hairstyle, and all background and clothing cues were obscured using Photoshop. Photographs were presented using Microsoft PowerPoint on a white background with a subject number assigned to the bottom of the picture. The sex of the target's photograph was never identified.

1.1.2. Participants

A total of 355 undergraduate students from a large university in the Northeast United States were recruited to rate the photos. Participants either volunteered without compensation or received research credit in exchange for taking part in the study. Due to some evidence of out-group prejudices with respect to ratings of attractiveness in target individuals (e.g., Devine, 1989), and because all target photos were of White individuals, only data from White raters were retained for analysis ($N = 253$; 145 females and 108 males). Participants were mostly young adults; 97.2% were between the ages of 18–24, and 2.8% were 25 years of age or older. Participants were not informed about the purpose of the study.

1.1.3. Procedure

The photos were presented en masse to four groups of raters varying in size from 58 to 75 participants. One researcher briefly explained to participants the task and asked them to complete a demographic questionnaire. When all participants

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