



Physical attractiveness and its relation to unprovoked and reactive aggression

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ABSTRACT

Studies have linked facial attractiveness to positive outcomes and unattractiveness to negative ones. However, no study has examined whether attractiveness and aggression are related, even though there is a relationship between unattractiveness and risk factors for aggression like neglect and bullying. In this study, 78 men and women engaged in unprovoked and reactive physical aggression tasks, and reactive derogation of a fictitious opponent. The participants were graded on attractiveness by a group of independent raters. The results indicated that for male participants, unattractiveness predicted unprovoked and reactive aggression as strongly as callous/unemotional psychopathic traits. Among female participants, attractiveness predicted derogation of the opponents more strongly than any psychopathic trait. Implications from gene-environment correlation and social role theory perspectives are discussed.

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1. Introduction

Across various domains, studies suggest that attractive persons are perceived more favorably than unattractive ones, leading early researchers to propose that there is a “beautiful is good” stereotype (Dion, Berscheid, & Walster, 1972, p. 285). Indeed, subsequent studies and meta-analyses have shown that attractive individuals are perceived as more socially skilled, mentally healthy, intelligent, and also accrue more dating experiences, satisfying social interactions, and occupational success, than their unattractive counterparts (e.g., Eagly, Ashmore, Makhijani, & Longo, 1991; Feingold, 1992; Langlois et al., 2000; Reis et al., 1982). Therefore, it is not surprising that many people spend substantial effort and resources to increase their attractiveness. In 1998, Americans spent eight billion dollars on cosmetics. By 2016 these sales are expected to exceed ten billion dollars in the US and 41.4 billion worldwide (Etoff, Stock, Haley, Vickery, & House, 2011; United Nations Development Programme, 1998). More drastic attractiveness-enhancement tactics are also on the rise. In 2001, there were an estimated 3.4 million facial dermatological surgeries in the US and by 2007 the number had reached 7.6 million with soft tissue augmentation having the largest percentage increase (405%) followed by non-ablative skin “rejuvenation” (e.g., laser skin resurfacing, 330.7%) and botulinum toxin injections (324%, Tierney & Hanke, 2009).

The above statistics attest to the perceived importance of facial adornments as a component of attractiveness. However,

attractiveness is a multifaceted construct that also includes biological characteristics and behavior (e.g., Elliot & Niesta, 2008; Etoff et al., 2011; Gangestad et al., 2004). In general, these data indicate that both biological and artificial cues that signal reproductive fitness (i.e., youth and physical vigor) are perceived as more attractive and are related to positive life outcomes. For example, experimental findings show that women tend to prefer men who display interpersonal dominance and competitiveness (although these preferences vary across the menstrual cycle, Gangestad et al., 2004). On the other hand, with regard to artificial adornment, another study found that third party observers rated photographs of Caucasian women wearing make-up as more attractive, having greater earning potential, and more prestigious jobs than when the women in the pictures did not wear make-up (Nash, Fieldman, Hussey, Lévêque, & Pineau, 2006).

Nonetheless, of the different biological, behavioral, and artificial attractiveness cues that have been studied, facial attractiveness has received outsized research attention (e.g., see Thornhill & Gangestad, 1999 for a review). This may be because across multiple studies, facial attractiveness reliably relates to various important life outcomes including longevity, physical strength, fertility and even IQ, leading some researchers to dub it an “honest” signal of reproductive potential (Gallup & Frederick, 2010, p. 247). Facial attractiveness also presents a research advantage because it shows high observer agreement across ages, and in contrast to other biological or artificial cues like waist to hip ratio, or use of cosmetics, it is less susceptible to influence by cultural and social norms (Gallup & Frederick, 2010; Langlois et al., 2000). Finally, the impact of innate facial attractiveness is evident very early in life, well before other cues like musculature, socially dominant behavior, or adornment come into play. For example, observers and parents

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give attractive infants better ratings in behavior, health, and intelligence measures, and mothers of attractive infants are more affectionate and playful with their babies (Cash, 1990; Langlois, Ritter, Casey, & Swain, 1995; Stephan & Langlois, 1984).

Notably, the same studies that show a “beautiful is good effect” also find that unattractiveness is related to a negative pattern of attitudes and behaviors from others, leading some researchers to suggest that there is a form of “beautyism” (Cash, 1990, p. 56) or that “ugly is bad” (Dermer & Thiel, 1975, p. 1171; Griffin & Langlois, 2006, p. 187). Parents and observers of unattractive infants are more likely to have negative attitudes towards them (Langlois et al., 1995; Stephan & Langlois, 1984), and later in life, unattractive children may be more likely to be physically abused, treated less favorably by teachers in preschool, and bullied more during pre-teen years (Roscoe, Callahan, & Peterson, 1985; Sweeting & West, 2001). The aforementioned findings are notable because these negative attitudes from caregivers and peers have been etiologically linked to aggression later in life (e.g., Jaffee et al., 2005; Kotch et al., 2008). Therefore, unattractiveness may be a distal risk factor for aggression through its elicitation of unfavorable treatment from others.

Additional data from adult samples provide further indirect support for a possible association between unattractiveness and aggression. First, lower attractiveness has been linked to worse psychiatric outcomes even after accounting for factors such as age, education, frequency of hospitalization, and pre-discharge adjustment (Farina, Burns, Austad, Bugglin, & Fischer, 1986). Second, a study found that observers rated digitally “masculinized” photographs of men and women’s faces as less attractive, more dominant, less honest, less emotional, and less cooperative (Perrett et al., 1998). Some of those same traits (dominance, self-centeredness, and unemotionality) are the hallmark of psychopathy, a personality constellation consistently related to interpersonal aggression in correlational and experimental studies (e.g., Muñoz, Frick, Kimonis, & Aucoin, 2008; Patrick & Zempolich, 1998; Reidy, Zeichner, Miller, & Martinez, 2007). Therefore, various studies implicate attractiveness with risk factors and personality traits linked to aggression, but do not address whether attractiveness itself is related to aggression.

While previous studies have examined how perceived attractiveness and aggressiveness interact to affect psychosocial outcomes such as popularity (e.g., Borch, Hyde, & Cillessen, 2011), or how attractive socially aggressive/dominant behavior may be perceived by others (Gangestad et al., 2004), to date no study has examined a possible link between attractiveness and aggression. This relationship may have been ignored because of the legacy of discredited pseudoscientific approaches which claimed that physical characteristics could be used to distinguish criminal personalities (for critical review see, Gould, 1996). However, despite this historical precedent, modern researchers within criminology caution against discarding biological and genetic factors (such as attractiveness) as influential in the development of antisociality (e.g., Wright et al., 2008).

The current study helps address this gap by examining if physical attractiveness as rated by third party observers is related to willingness to engage in laboratory analogues of unprovoked and reactive physical aggression, as well as reactive aggression in the form of derogation of a fictitious opponent’s attractiveness. Given data linking unattractiveness to risk factors associated with aggression, it was hypothesized that unattractiveness would be related to higher levels of aggression. In addition, given the association between interpersonal dominance and unemotionality to aggression, these traits were also assessed to determine whether they played a moderating role between unattractiveness and aggression. Previous self-report and objective data show that men are more physically aggressive, while women display more

indirect or relational aggression, although these differences tend to be smaller or disappear in experimental settings (Archer, 2004; Eagly & Steffen, 1986). Also, other studies show that attractiveness for men and women has differential correlates (e.g., assertiveness and trust of others, Reis et al., 1982). Therefore, relationships between attractiveness and aggression were initially examined separately for men and women, and then a set of analyses with gender as a moderator were performed to determine whether any differences that emerged between the men and women were significant.

2. Material and methods

2.1. Participants

There were two separate sets of participants included in this study. One set (“targets”), completed personality and aggression tasks (along with psychophysiological measures not reported here). The second group acted as independent raters (“raters”) of the targets’ attractiveness.

2.1.1. Targets

A total of 78 participants (43 women) age 18 or older were selected for this study from a larger mass screening of students enrolled in introductory psychology at a public southeastern university. Participants were excluded if they had a history of hearing loss, serious head trauma and/or coma (which could affect psychophysiological measurements not reported here). The mean age of this sample was 19.26 ($SD = 1.10$), and self-reported racial and ethnic composition was 3.8% Asian, 6.4% Black/African American, 12.8% Hispanic/Latino, 2.6% Native Hawaiian/Other Pacific Islander, 66.7% White/Caucasian, and 7.7% Other. Participants received their choice of research participation credits or \$20 for their time.

2.1.2. Raters

A total of 121 participants (80 women) were selected as raters from a different public university in another state within the southeastern United States. Raters were excluded if they had vision impairment that would preclude them from viewing photographs of the targets. The mean age of the rater sample was 19.52 ($SD = 2.33$), and self-reported racial and ethnic composition was 3.3% Asian, 9.0% Black/African American, 3.3% Hispanic/Latino, 72.1% White/Caucasian, and 9.8% Other (mixed ethnic background or other category not specified). The targets and raters did not differ significantly in age $t(197) = 1.15, p = .25$ (two-tailed). There was no association between university of origin for target and rater participants and their gender ($\chi^2(1) = 2.68, p = .10$) or ethnic background ($\chi^2(1) = 1.21, p = .27$).

2.2. Measure: Target participants

2.2.1. Psychopathy

Traits that encompass dishonesty, unemotionality, and social dominance ascribed to less attractive faces in experimental studies (e.g., Perrett et al., 1998) are well captured by the construct of psychopathy, a personality constellation consistently linked to aggression (Hare, 2003). Psychopathic traits were assessed using the Psychopathic Personality Inventory (PPI; Lilienfeld & Andrews, 1996). Items are scored on a 1–4 Likert scale and the measure is composed of eight subscales that tap various aspects of psychopathic personality (Machiavellian Egocentricity, Social Potency, Coldheartedness, Carefree Nonplanfulness, Fearlessness, Blame Externalization, Impulsive Nonconformity, and Stress Immunity). Factor analyses of the PPI among male community and imprisoned samples suggest a two (Benning, Patrick, Hicks, Blonigen, &

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