

This Week's Citation Classic

Dion K K, Berscheid E & Walster E. What is beautiful is good.
J. Personal. Soc. Psychol. 24:285-90, 1972.
[University of Minnesota, MN and University of Wisconsin, WI]

This study examined whether physical attractiveness affects beliefs about others' personality and expected success in different aspects of adult life (such as occupational prestige, personal happiness). The findings indicated that stereotyping based on physical (specifically, facial) attractiveness does occur. Physically attractive individuals were rated as having more socially desirable personalities and were expected to have greater personal success on most of the life outcome dimensions. [The *SSCI*® indicates that this paper has been cited in more than 360 publications.]

Stereotyping Based on Physical Attractiveness

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I undertook this research while a graduate student at the University of Minnesota working with Ellen Berscheid in the area of social psychology. As I read the literature concerning attraction and social relationships, the findings of a study conducted by Elaine (Hatfield) Walster and her colleagues concerning the effect of physical attractiveness on interpersonal attraction¹ intrigued me. I wondered whether attractiveness might gain some of its impact by influencing beliefs about a person's less immediately observable characteristics. Physical attractiveness, specifically, facial attractiveness, might affect inferences about an individual's personality and expected outcomes in various areas of adult life.

To test this hypothesis, I designed this study, which was conducted in collaboration with Berscheid and Walster.

Why has this study been highly cited? Our results were strong and provocative, since forming an initial evaluation of an individual based on his or her facial attractiveness violates the ideals of fairness in evaluations of others. If asked whether they judged an individual's personality and character based on his or her facial attractiveness, it seemed likely that most people's replies would reflect sayings such as "you can't judge a book by its cover" or other

similar admonitions. We found, however, that physical attractiveness did influence evaluations of others, with attractive individuals receiving more favorable evaluations. Our findings drew attention to the need to examine systematically the contribution made by physical attractiveness to interpersonal judgments. (See also reference 2.)

Although the occurrence of physical attractiveness stereotyping has been extensively documented since the publication of this paper, understanding why it occurs is still very much a central question. Several conceptual accounts have explanatory value, including social-cognitive, social learning/sociocultural,³ and personality/individual differences perspectives. My recent research on attractiveness stereotyping has in particular focused on the latter two perspectives. For example, Ken Dion and I examined the personality dimension of "just world" ideology as a moderator of attractiveness stereotyping.⁴ More recently, I have begun a program of research to address the following questions: Is stereotyping based on facial attractiveness a culturally specific phenomenon? Is its occurrence related to particular value orientations and other sociocultural factors?⁵

What other developments in my thinking about this area of research have occurred since this paper was published? As I have noted previously, the pattern of findings across a number of studies suggests that physical attractiveness is especially likely to affect certain types of personality attributions, specifically, beliefs about others' interpersonal ease and social competence.^{3,6} Moreover, although there is evidence that facial attractiveness influences first impressions of women and of men, it should not be assumed that the possible psychological and behavioral consequences of attractiveness stereotyping are the same for women and for men, respectively, since gender role expectations may mediate its impact.⁶ We need to learn more about the relation between attractiveness stereotyping and its potential effect(s) on different domains of interpersonal behavior since much of the research to date has continued to examine stereotyping per se. Ultimately, I hope that knowledge of when and why attractiveness stereotyping occurs will provide some insights about effective interventions to help overcome its influence.

1. Walster E, Aronson V, Abrahams D & Rottmann L. Importance of physical attractiveness in dating behavior. *J. Personal. Soc. Psychol.* 4:508-16, 1966. (Cited 235 times.)
2. Dion K K. Young children's stereotyping of facial attractiveness. *Develop. Psychol.* 9:183-8, 1973. (Cited 60 times.)
3. Stereotyping based on physical attractiveness: issues and conceptual perspectives. (Herman C P, Zanna M & Higgins E T, eds.) *Physical appearance, stigma, and social behavior: the Ontario symposium.* Hillsdale, NJ: Erlbaum, 1986. Vol. 3, p. 7-21. (Cited 5 times.)
4. Dion K L & Dion K K. Belief in a just world and physical attractiveness stereotyping. *J. Personal. Soc. Psychol.* 52:775-80, 1987.
5. Dion K K, Pak A & Dion K L. Stereotyping physical attractiveness: a sociocultural perspective. *J. Cross-Cult. Psychol.* 21:378-98, 1990.
6. Dion K K. Physical attractiveness, sex roles and heterosexual attraction. (Cook M, ed.) *The bases of human sexual attraction.* London: Academic Press, 1981, p. 3-21.

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