This Week's Citation Classic


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 SSC® indicates that this paper has been cited in more than 360 publications.)

Stereotyping Based on Physical Attractiveness
Karen K. Dion
Division of Life Sciences
University of Toronto
Scarborough, Ontario M1C 1A4
Canada

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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 attraction 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 attractiveness stereotyping based on facial attractiveness culturally specific phenomena? Is its occurrence related to particular value orientations and other sociocultural factors?

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. 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 mediate its impact. We need to learn more about the relationship between attractiveness stereotyping and its potential effects 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.