PHYSICAL ATTRACTIVENESS, HAPPINESS, NEUROTICISM, AND SELF-ESTEEM*

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SUMMARY

The hypothesis that physical attractiveness is positively correlated with happiness, psychological health, and self-esteem was tested with 211 men and women undergraduates. Physical attractiveness was measured by judges' ratings, while happiness, psychological health (neuroticism), and self-esteem were measured by self-report inventories. Physical attractiveness was found to correlate positively with happiness ($r = .37$), negatively with neuroticism ($r = -.22$), and positively with self-esteem ($r = .24$) for women but not for men (corresponding $rs = .09$, .03, and -.04, respectively). These results were accounted for by the suggestion that physical attractiveness "buys" more for women than for men, and the most prominent outcomes obtained by physical attractiveness—friends and dates—are of greater value to women undergraduates than men. The superior outcomes obtained by the attractive women made them happy, psychologically healthy, and proud of themselves.

A. INTRODUCTION

A number of studies have shown that in a social exchange physical attractiveness is a positive input and can be used to obtain a variety of good outcomes for its possessor. One of the most frequently obtained outcomes is liking. Attractive people are liked more as friends (5, 6, 16), dates (3, 4, 14, 21), sex partners (10), and spouses (9). Attractive people receive more positive evaluations from others (18) and empathy (2) than unattractive people. Other good outcomes obtained by attractive people include more work from subordinates (19), greater attitude agreement (15), better grades (12, 20), and higher status spouses (8). As a result of the many

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good outcomes obtained by attractive people, it seems likely that they are happier and better adjusted than unattractive people. It is also probable that the liking received from others is reflected in a high self-esteem. To test this reasoning, ratings of physical attractiveness were correlated with measures of happiness, neuroticism, and self-esteem. It was hypothesized that attractiveness would correlate positively with happiness and self-esteem and negatively with neuroticism.

B. Method

1. Subjects

One hundred and ten men and 101 women from the introductory psychology courses at Iowa State University participated in this study.

2. Procedure

Subjects in groups of approximately 35 people filled out measures of happiness (13), neuroticism (11), and self-esteem (17). While they were filling out the measures, ratings of physical attractiveness were covertly made by two male and two female undergraduate judges. Ratings were made on seven-point scales ranging from "very unattractive" to "very attractive". The average interrater reliability was .51 (range = .47 to .56) which gave composite ratings a reliability of .81.

C. Results

Ratings of physical attractiveness were correlated with scores on the happiness, neuroticism, and self-esteem inventories separately for men and women. For women physical attractiveness correlated .37 with happiness, -.22 with neuroticism, and .24 with self-esteem. For men the correlations were .09, .03, and -.04, respectively. (With 99 degrees of freedom, correlations of .20 or greater are significant at the .05 level.)

D. Discussion

The hypothesis that physical attractiveness would correlate positively with happiness and self-esteem and negatively with neuroticism was supported for women but not for men. Why was the hypothesis supported for women but not men? One reason may be that physical attractiveness is not as general an input as was originally believed. Physical attractiveness may only be an input in heterosexual exchanges, and it may be a more valuable input when it is possessed by a woman than when it is possessed by a man.
Thus an attractive woman may obtain better outcomes from men than an equally attractive man obtains from women. If physical attractiveness as an input is more important to women than men, it follows that the correlations between attractiveness and happiness, psychological health, and self-esteem should be higher for women than men. Supporting this interpretation of the results, most of the studies reviewed at the beginning of this paper dealt with outcomes received by women (2, 8, 9, 10, 12, 15, 18, 19, 20).

A second explanation may be that the outcomes which both sexes obtain as a result of physical attractiveness and the only documented outcomes obtained by men—that is, friends (5, 6, 16) and dates (3, 4, 14, 21)—are of greater importance and value to women than to men. Because affiliative needs of women have been found to be greater than those of men (7), friends and dates may be more important to women than men, and as a result positive correlations between attractiveness and happiness, psychological health, and self-esteem exist for women but not men. Supporting this interpretation of the results is the fact that our culture defines the successful woman as the woman who affiliates and the successful man as the man who achieves (1).

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