

Physical attraction in couples



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Throughout our history, people have long wondered what is the most important quality to look for a romance, marriage and friendship. To some it may be the great target person's financial assets and educational/occupational achievements. To others it may be one's physical health and personality characteristics. However, almost everyone would agree that physical attraction is the very important qualities when looking for a partner in life. Stereotypes regarding physical attraction are widely held in our society.

Against the ideals of free will and equal opportunity, these stereotypes manifest subtle influence on the way we perceived and initiate social interaction with others in various relationships especially in a man and woman relationship. The essence of these stereotypes is vary simple: Physical and facial beauty is perceived to be associated with more positive personal and social characteristics, whereas unattractiveness is perceived to be associated with more negative and socially undesirable qualities (Berscheid, 1985; Bull & Rumsey, 1988; Jackson, 1992).

Do we all want a physically attractive person to be our partner? Or do we live by the proverb, " Birds of a same feather flock together," and look for some who looks similar to us? Although the degree to which people are concerned with one's appearance may vary, physical attraction certainly occupies an important place in each partner's choice consideration. Since our physical appearance is a readily accessible motivation to others in almost every social occasion, it is easily understood why many of us are so obsessed with physical attraction, particularly in choosing a partner to be called a couple.

The anthropological approach to attraction deals with social forces or preconditions for enduring relationships. In this class of variables, the most significant is the physical characteristics (Clatterbuck, 1975). Huston (1973) suggested that physical appeal is the important key component in fostering attraction. A physically attractive person increases one's self esteem and social status. Bryne, London, and Reeves (1968) suggested that physical characteristics are the most important determinant of couples' attraction in first impressions.

People stereotype or draw inferences about other people based on physical characteristics. Walster, Aronson, Abrahams, and Rottman (1966) concluded that " regardless of S's own attractiveness by far the largest determinant of how much his partner was liked, how much he wanted to date the partner again, and how often he actually asked the partner out was simply how physically appealing the partner was. " Walster et al. 1966) made the following two assumptions regarding physical attraction in couple:

(a) Physical attractiveness is considered a highly desirable personal quality, particularly in a partner choice situation; and (b) physical attractiveness of a potential partners and the availability of those targets in a given courtship market are negatively correlated meaning that the more attractive the targets are, the less available they would be as potential partners due to their high popularity. Combining these assumptions with the theory of aspiration, Walster et al. 1966) generated a more specific hypothesis about typical mate choice behavior. In their own words, the original matching hypothesis states that" . . . an individual would most often expect to date, would try to date, and would like a partner of approximately his/her own

social desirability (measured by the physical attractiveness level). Stroebe, Insko, Thompson, and Layton (1971) discovered that the physical attraction in a couple had a greater factor to dating aspiration than marrying aspiration.

That is if a female targets become more attractive, the male subjects would want to date the targets more than they would like to marry them. In other words, the male subjects clearly preferred highly attractive female targets as dating partners, while their preference toward high attractiveness declined in their spousal choice. This provides the evidence that the targets' physical attractiveness is more important consideration in a less serious mate choice situation. (e. g. casual dating) than in more serious mate choice a situation (e. g. , marriage). Additionally, Stroebe et al. (1971) also found that such association between the targets' level of physical attraction and the subjects' dating aspiration with those targets' levels of physical attraction and the subjects' dating aspiration with those targets was much stronger possibility that a sex differences exists in the effect of one's physical attraction on his or her dating popularity in a courtship market.

Besides the experimental studies summarized above, several field observation were also conducted in an attempt to discover the matching tendency among real couples in different stages of courtship progress. For example Murstein (1972) conducted a correlational study among college couples who were actually going steady or engaged. In this study, the subjects' levels of physical attraction were measured in three different ways: (a) judgment by self-perception, (b) judgment by the partners' perception, and (c) judgement by the experimenter' perception from photos.

Then each of these attractiveness measurements was correlated between the male and female subject within a couple. The results showed that the two types of correlations for the couples' physical attraction - one measured by their self-perception, and the other measured by the experimenters' perceptions from photos - were significantly higher than those of the randomly paired individuals in the control group. In short, real couples were found matched up on their attractiveness levels at least in both subjective (i. e. , self-perception) and objective eyes (i. e. , third party-perception).

Mckillip and Riedel (1983) also obtained similar results in a field study, in which college students in various types of relationships were observed. In this study, the correlation between the male's and female's physical attraction levels rated by the observers revealed a significant matching tendency among (a) opposite sex-friends, (b) dating couples, and (c) seriously committed couples. Regarding the intensity of the matching tendency across various stage of courtship progress, White (1980) discovered that couples who were more advanced in their courtship relations (i. . , going steady, engaged, or married, as opposed to casually dating) were more equivalent in their attractiveness levels. White also found that such a similarity was positively correlated with the courtship progress of the couples who had been less committed to each other initially. That is, the more committed the couple becomes, the stronger the matching tendency they demonstrate. Finally, Price and Vandenberg (1979) examined the matching tendency among married couples sampled from the mainland of the United State and Hawaii.

In this study, each sample was divided into three subgroups based on age and the duration of marriage: (a) young and recently married, (b) middle-aged, and (c) older couples. For both the mainland and Hawaii samples Price and Vanderberg found significant correlation between spouses' levels of physical attraction within across all age groups. This indicates that the matching tendencies observed among real couples are very stable both within and across different age groups.

Aside from these findings in the studies of physical attraction, a few additional findings warrant further attention. One such discovery is the gender difference in the degree to which males and female's physical attraction is weighed differentially in a typical courtship market. More specifically, within the general tendency those more attractive individuals are preferred in various mate selection, physical attractiveness of females plays a more important role in courtship market than that of males (Stroebe et al. 1971; Jacson, 1992). For instance, in the original study by Walster et al. (1966), it was found that the correlation between the subjects' level of physical attraction and their dating popularity was much stronger for female than for male. This indicates that the dating popularity of a woman depends more heavily on her appearance, whereas for a man it does not depend so much on his appearance. Berscheid et al. (1971) also found similar facts concerning one's physical attraction and dating popularity.

In their study, the correlation between physical attractiveness (measured by a third party judge) and self-reported dating popularity was more than two time higher for the female subjects than for the male subjects. These findings are compatible with some of the earliest studies on the attitudes of

college students towards marital choice (Hewitt, 1985), which revealed the higher aspiration of males for more attractive mates in courtship relations. They are also compatible with the findings in Coombs and Kenkel's (1966) experimental study, which was specifically designed to test this gender difference.

Regarding such gender differences within heterosexual attraction, there is yet another notable discovery. It is the halo effect of female's physical attraction has on that of her male partner when both parties are evaluated together by the same third party judges (Bar-Tal & Saxe, 1976; Sigall & Landy, 1973). For instance, in a study conducted by Sigall and Landy (1973), a male confederate was evaluated by the same judges under two conditions: (a) High-Attractiveness condition; and (b) Low-Attractiveness condition, in which the same man was accompanied by an unattractive woman.

The results showed that not only was he evaluated more favorable under High-Attractiveness conditions, but also his evaluation became rather unfavorable under Low-Attractiveness conditions. Bar-Tal and Saxe (1976) also found support for a similar halo effect among married couples. In this study, favorable evaluation of the male subjects by a third party judge was heavily dependent on the physical attraction of their wives, while the evaluation of females was not particularly dependent on the association with appearance of their husbands.

These studies on various levels of the matching phenomenon collectively suggests that the matching tendency manifest more strongly in more serious mate selection (that requires higher level of commitment) than in less serious mate selection (that requires lower level of commitment). They also

suggest that the matching tendency that operates in the initial formation of the courtship relation is so stable that it persists across different age cohorts and various types of heterosexual mate selections (e. g. young and old couples, dating couples, married couples, etc.) These studies also on sex difference in salience of physical attraction and the gender specific halo effect seem to have made a clear point that the common sense assertion in a popular TV commercial was true at least from men’s perspective: “ If you don’t look good, we don’t look good. ” Indeed, a woman’s physical attraction has a strong impact not only on her courtship popularity but also on the general impression that her male partner gives to other.