Physical attractiveness of defendant

Abstract

The purpose of the investigation was to see if the physical attractiveness of a defendant has an influence of the severity of prison sentences given for a crime of fraud.

An opportunity sample consisting of 10 males and 10 females taken from sixth form students at school aged 16-18 was used. A crime vignette was given to participants with a photo of the physically attractive defendant or physically un attractive defendant attached. Participants had to state whether they thought the defendant was guilty or not guilty. Participants were then told that the defendants were found guilty and were asked to assign a prison term that they felt the defendant deserved.

The Chi-Square and T-Test were used to analyse the results. Observed Value of T= 30. 88: Critical value at p <0. 05 is 1. 734. It was concluded that the physical attractive defendants were given shorter prison sentences than the physically un attractive defendants.

Project Brief

PB1:

The aim is to see if Sigall & Ostrove’s (1975) findings that the physical attractiveness of a defendant and the nature of the crime can lead to differing sentences are applicable to this current time period.

Alternative hypothesis: The more attractive defendant will receive a lower sentence for burglary than the less attractive defendant.

Null Hypothesis: There will be no difference in length of sentences given to the attractive defendant and the non attractive defendant.

PB2:

A directional hypothesis is being used as past research by Sigall & Ostrove's (1975) has shown that physical attractiveness does have an effect on the length of a sentence giving to the defendant.

PB3:

The chosen research method will be experimental using an independent measures design. So each group will be tested in a different condition one group will be shown a picture with a physically attractive defendant and the other group will see a picture with a non attractive defendant.

PB4:

Advantages

- Confounding variables minimised
- Study is in a controlled environment so the variables can be manipulated

Disadvantages

- No control of participant variables as due to individuals differences the participants may not find the pictures attractive.
- There maybe a social desirability bias as participants may put what they think is the norm or socially desirable rather than what they actually think.
- There maybe investigator and participant effects.

PB5:

Demand Characteristics

Participants may respond in accordance to experimenters desired response i. e. the experimenter may influence the participant in the way in which he states the scenario of the crime or by subconscious gestures.

Age Group Bias

All participants are between the age of 16-18 so results may not be external valid as other age groups may have different results and respond differently.

Participant Bias

Participants may give into social norms and may no give there true opinion when rating. They may rate pictures higher or lower than they really feel.

PB6:

Single Blind

The participants and the experimenter will be told that the study is on studying something other than what there doing so the participants and the experimenter wont be able to guess the aim of the study.

Standardise Instructions

All conditions of the study are given the same standardised instructions so investigator bias is eliminated.

Social Desirability Bias

The results will be anonymous and confidential, giving the chance for the participants a option to withdraw at any time so the participants may not feel the need to put what the experimenter may see as the norm.

PB7: 5% level of significance

PB8:

Deception

Not telling the participants the true nature of the study by using a single blind technique. This will be overcome by debriefing the participants at the end of the study to ensure that the participants are happy.

Privacy

The pictures will be taking from websites which are on public domains so anyone can access them.

Informed Consent

Participants will be asked if they want to participate and told the basic procedures as well i. e. giving the right to withdraw etc.

Withdrawal

Participants will be able to withdraw at any time during the study and will be told this throughout the study.

Debrief

The participants will be fully debriefed as to the true aims of the study has been completed after the study.

Observation

The participants will not be observed.

Confidentially

None of the participants names will be taken and they will not be observed during the study so the results will remain anonymous.

Introduction

The Halo effect (Dion & Walster, 1972) is the tendency of a characteristic such as physical attractiveness to influence an individual's perception of person's qualities such as intelligence, social status and personal traits. Research has found that attractive people are attributed with more positive characteristics due to the Halo Effect. Dion & Walster (1972) conducted an experiment called ' What is Beautiful is Good' and found that individuals who are seen as physically attractive are assumed by particpants to have more socially desirable personalities than those who are less attractive, and it is also assumed that attractive individuals lives will be more successful and enjoyable than individuals who are less attractive. So attractive individuals are assumed to be more sociably desired. Dion et als (1972) findings indicate that stereotyping due to individuals physical attractiveness does occur as physical attractive individuals were regarded to have more socially desired qualities and personalities, and were expected to have greater personal success in there life. These results have also been supported by Griddin &

Langlois (2006) and Feingold (1992) who found that unattractive people are perceived to hold more negative attributes.

The Halo effect has been applied in research into other areas of society. For example in school or workplaces. As a study on attractiveness in school found by Clifford & Walster (1973) and Landy & Sigall (1974) found that two essays which had exactly the same content were marked differently. This was belived to be due to them having pictures of the students on the essays and the more attractive person received a higher grade even though the essays were the same. This shows that physical attractiveness does affect people's way of thinking in real life settings. Another study has shown that the halo effect has an effect in job interviews as it has been found by Dipboye, Arvey, & Terpstra, (1977) and Landy & Sigall, (1974) that the more attractive individuals where more likely to get the jobs offered than the unattractive individuals even though they did the same on the tasks to get the interviews.

Baron and Byrne (1997) found that attractive defendants are more likely to receive lighter sentences and gain the sympathy of the jurors rather than unattractive individuals. This is believed to be due to the Halo Effect ' What is beautiful is good'. Sigall & Ostrove (1975) also found that participants who were shown an attractive photo of a defendant charged with burglary recommend almost half the average sentence of those show no photo or an unattractive photo. Stewart (1980) also found that attractive defendants tended to receive lighter sentences and were less likely to receive prison sentences than unattractive individuals. These results were further supported by Efrans (1974) study as Efran (1974) found that juries were not

as certain about the guilt of attractive defendants, and therefore gave them lighter sentences/ punishments. However it has been found that there were different factors which influence the sentence giving to an attractive individual. For example the attractiveness of an individual didn’t have much of an effect on sentences when the crime was seen as very serious. Sigall & Ostrove (1975) also found that attractive defendants were charged with a higher average sentences when fraud was the crime rather than the unattractive individuals or defendant with no photo. Their results showed that when the crime committed wasn’t related to physical attractiveness (e. g. burglary) the participants would give lighter sentences to the attractive defendant rather than to the unattractive defendant. In contrast when the crime was related to attractiveness (e. g. swindle), the physically attractive defendant would receive a worse sentence. The Halo Effect explains these findings in that when crimes are not related to attractiveness, the attractive participants may be seen as good due to the Halo Effect and positive stereotyping. For the physically attractive crimes the juror may feel that the attractive individuals used there attractiveness as a natural advantage to further promote themselves in society. Fraud is regarded as deceitful and is related to attractiveness thus more attractive defendants would be punished more severely.

Aim: This study will replicate Sigall & Ostrove’s (1975) study to provide further support for previous findings see if the physical attractiveness of a defendant and the nature of the crime can lead to differing sentences in this current time period.

Alternative hypothesis: The more attractive defendant will receive a lower sentence for burglary than the less attractive defendant.

Null Hypothesis: There will be no difference in length of sentences given to the attractive defendant and the non attractive defendant.

Method:

Method and design

In the experiment the IV is the physical attractiveness of the defendants and the DV was the judgement that the participants gave the photos of the physically attractive defendant and unattractive defendant i. e. guilty or not guilty. An independent group design is being used so one group of participants will be tested with the physically attractive photo of the defendant and the other group will be tested with the unattractive photo of the defendant. A questionnaire was given to the male participants so ratings of the photographs of the females could be collected and so the best voted picture would be used as the physically attractive defendant and the worse would be used for the unattractive defendant.

Researchers

One A level student collected data.

Target population and sample

An opportunity sample consisting of 10 males and 10 females taken from sixth form students at school. The students who were available at the time were asked to participate in the study. All participants took part in the study and none of them declined.

Apparatus/materials

Pilot Study

Ten photographs were selected from the websites Hot or Not and RatePeople. com labelling them 1 – 10. All photographs were put on to A4 pieces of paper (one per page of paper). All photos were of passport shots so the defendants were looking straight at the camera and the defendants were between the ages of 20-40. This was controlled so the participant's view of the defendants didn't change due to the pose the defendant was doing or because they thought the defendant was to old and frail to go to jail or to young etc. There was as little jewellery or clothing in the pictures as possible so it wouldn't distort the participants view on the pictures as it may make the participant think the defendants were more or less attractive in the photos creating extraneous variable so this was done so it was only the defendant's attractiveness being taken into account.

Main Study

In the main study a scenario was given to participants (see Appendix 1) and the participants had to state whether they thought the defendant was guilty or not on the participant response sheet (see Appendix 2). Two photos were used in the main study from the pilot study (the best rated photo and the worst rated photo) which were used as defendants. The best voted picture was used as the physically attractive defendant and the worse was used for the unattractive defendant.

An example of one of the photographs use is shown in Appendix 3.

Standardised procedures

Pilot Study

The participants were taken into different rooms when completing the task so they weren’t distracted from other students.

The standardised instructions (see Appendix 4) were read to participants and consent was given.

Male participants were shown the photographs of the females, and the females were shown the photographs of the men. The participants were asked to rate each of the photographs on a scale of 1 – 10, with 10 being most attractive and 1 being not very attractive. The participants wrote their ratings on some paper with spaces for the ratings for the 10 photographs No names were asked for. An example of a participant response is shown in Appendix 5.

Main Study

The best rated photo and the worst rated photo were than used as defendants. The best voted picture was used as the physically attractive defendant and the worse was used for the unattractive defendant.

A different set of participants where given scenarios and asked if they would give a sentence to the defendant given to them and told to right down there answer on the participant response sheet.

One group was given the physically attractive photo whereas the other group was given the unattractive photo.

Participants after the task were thanked and debriefed (see Appendix 6).

Controls

Investigator bias was minimised by using standardised instructions.

The Single blind technique was used so researcher bias, participant bias and demand characteristic were avoided by asking someone else to observe the participants during the task and telling the observer not to look at the participants while they’re doing the task to avoid participant reactivity.

Participant bias was avoided by telling the participants to rate members of a opposite sex because the males may find it more difficult men in terms of physical attractiveness.

Ethics

Informed consent was gained as participants were given standardised instructions and told that they had the right to withdraw at any time and that their answers would remain anonymous.

There was minor deception as the participants weren’t told the aim of the study but this was dealt with as the participants were debriefed at the end of the study.

The ethical issue of using photos of people without there consent was dealt with as the photos used were put on websites where the people want there photos to be rated thus are available to the public.

Results: Descriptive Statistics

Summary table of the data to show the total number of guilty verdicts given to physically attractive and physically non-attractive defendant's.

Participants had to state whether they found the defendant given to them guilty or not guilty. A bar chart was drawn to display the results visually.

Summary table of the data to show mean prison sentences in months awarded to the attractive and non-attractive defendant's by the participants. A bar chart was drawn to display the results visually. The raw data given is in Appendix 7.

The Mean Length Of The Sentences Given To The Defendants

Physically Attractive: 21. 9 Months = 1. 8 Years

Physically Non-Attractive: 63. 6 Months = 5. 3 Years

Results: Inferential Statistics

The Chi-Square Test and T-Test were used to analyse the results.

The Chi-Square Test was appropriate for the data at a nominal level of measurement in a from of categories and the data collected from independent measures.

Chi Square = 0. 26

Degrees of freedom = 1

Critical value at p <0. 05 = 2. 71

As the observed value of chi-square was smaller than the critical value at a 5% level of significance, we cannot reject the null hypothesis and so it must be retained.

The T-Test was appropriate for the data that was at a interval level of measurement in the form of numerical data as the data collected was from independent measures.

Observed value of T = 30. 88

Degrees of freedom = 1

Critical value at p <0. 05 = 1. 734

As the observed value of T is higher than the critical value of T at a 5% level of significance the null hypothesis can be rejected.

Discussion

Explanation of findings

The findings of this investigation found that the physical attractiveness of a defendant can lead to differing sentences. Overall the physically attractive defendant received a lighter sentence than the physically unattractive defendant. The T-Test was significant at the 0. 05 level of significance supporting the assumption that the Halo effect will effect peoples views on whether a defendant is guilty or innocent.

Relationship to background research

There has been lots of research into whether the physical attractiveness can influence an individual’s perception of person’s qualities. Early research such

as Stewart (1980) found that attractive defendants tended to receive lighter sentences and were less likely to receive prison sentences than unattractive individuals. Baron and Byrne (1997) also found that attractive defendants are more likely to receive lighter sentences and gain the sympathy of the jurors rather than unattractive individuals. This study supports these earlier findings and in addition shows that this bias can lead to differing prison sentences being awarded to defendants even when the crime committed is the same.

This could be due to the halo effect which gives the tendency of a characteristic such as physical attractiveness to influence an individual's perception of person's qualities such as intelligence, social status and personal traits. This creates beautiful stereotypes which doesn't fit with the criminal stereotype such as scars, looking dirty etc.

Although the results could be because the participants generally believed that the physically attractive defendant was guilty and the physically unattractive defendant wasn't.

Limitations and modifications

The study lacks ecological validity as in real life the participants would be in a jury and so there would be a discussion between 12 people of varying ages on what the punishment the defendant should receive. In this experiment 6th form students were used aged between 16-18 and they made the decisions on there own rather than discussing the defendants punishment. To improve this a simulated jury could be used where the experimenter asks 12 participants to act as a jury and discuss the sentence.

Due to the participant sample used there was an sample bias as the study was on an opportunity sample of 6th form students. So the results can not be generalised to the whole population. There may have also been a problem due to demand characteristics as participants may have guessed the aims of the study and may have known what results were expected and answered accordingly. Another limitation of the study was that the experimenter knew the participants, so this may have lead the participants to write down what they thought the ‘ normal’ answer would be and not what they actually thought. So there may have been an social desirability bias. This could be dealt with by using a different target population and sample.

Another limitation of this study is that some participants didn’t find the unattractive defendant guilty as they didn’t believe that she would be able to get people into bed and so voted her not guilty. Some participants also stated that they didn’t believe that there as enough evidence to charge the defendants.

Another limitation of the study was individual differences as the study used independent measure design and some participants said they found the unattractive defendant guilty as they didn’t like her whereas some participants said they found the attractive defendant guilty as she was attractive whereas some said it was because she looked more promiscuous.

Another way to make future results more reliable is to do the study again but make the participants be in groups of 12 like a real jury and see if the same results are found. This will be more reliable as in a real life juries would discuss the punishment before given defendants sentences.

Implications and ideas for future research

To make the results more reliable a larger sample size could be used as this would mean that more data could be analysed and this may leads to different results. Also a different age range may also lead to different results as the older people may take it more seriously.

The important implications of this research shows that there is a bias in sentences given to defendants and to get rid of this bias juries may have to make there decisions by just looking at the research and maybe not be able to see the defendant in court as there’s a screen in front of them and there voice is changed.