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Similarity and Attractiveness in Social Perception: Differentiating Between Biases for the Self and the Beautiful

ROBERT S. HORTON

Wabash College, Crawfordsville, Indiana, USA

An impressive empirical literature suggests that physical attractiveness is associated with interpersonal attraction and with specific personality traits, some of which are favorable and many of which are objectively unrelated to attractiveness. Interestingly, much of the research investigating the impact of attractiveness on liking and personality inference has not accounted for the role of the self in social perception. In this project I investigated the possibility that perceptual similarity between the self and target contributes to differential judgments of attractive and unattractive individuals. Participants completed self-ratings of physical attractiveness and evaluated a target who was high, medium, or low in physical attractiveness. As expected, participants rated themselves as relatively attractive and as similar on attractiveness to attractive targets. Target evaluations varied as a function of target attractiveness; however, self-ratings on attractiveness moderated the impact of target attractiveness on liking for and personality inferences about the target. Attractiveness similarity also completely mediated the effect of target attractiveness on liking. The findings are discussed with regard to implicit personality theory and implicit egotism.

Beautiful people curry favor in extensive ways and in a variety of contexts. They receive lighter prison sentences for the same crime (Kulka & Kessler, 1978; Soloman & Schopler, 1978) and better grades for similar work (Landy & Sigall, 1974), are more persuasive (Parekh & Kanekar, 1994), and elicit more favorable interpersonal behavior (Snyder, Tanke, & Berscheid, 1977) and occupational evaluations (Chaikin, Gillen, Derlega, Heinen, & Wilson, 1978) than their less attractive counterparts. Attractive individuals are also perceived as having better mental health (Cash, Kehr, Polyson, & Freeman, 1977) and social aptitude, as being happier with life and more successful in their occupations (Dion, Berscheid, & Walster, 1972), and as more popular, intelligent, confident, assertive (see Eagly, Ashmore, Makhijani, & Longo, 1991 for a review), likable, and romantically desirable (Stroebe, Insko, Thompson, & Layton, 1971) than less attractive people. So pervasive are the emotional, evaluative, and inferential differences inspired by attractive and unattractive individuals

that researchers originally subscribed to the notion that "what is beautiful is good." Though we now understand this idiom as an oversimplification (see Dermer & Thiel, 1975), the advantages afforded attractive individuals are substantial and varied.

To explain the favor afforded attractive individuals, researchers have cited a halo effect (i.e., individuals who are gifted in one aspect are assumed to be gifted in other aspects as well; Nisbett & Wilson, 1977; Wetzel, Wilson, & Kort, 1981), implicit personality theories created by cultural representation and direct observation of attractive individuals (Ashmore, 1981; Eagly et al., 1991), egoistic needs that are served via identification with attractive partners (Campbell, 1999; Sigall; & Landy, 1973), and evolutionary mechanisms that prioritize attractiveness in mate selection (Li, Bailey, Kenrick, & Linsenmeier, 2002). In this article, I explore additional influences on judgments of attractive and unattractive individuals: self-perceptions and similarity to the self.

Previous investigations of the judgmental effects of target attractiveness have proceeded, for the most part, without acknowledging the role of the evaluator's self-beliefs in the judgment process, a curious omission given the importance of the self in social perception (e.g., Green & Sedikides, 2001; Lewicki, 1983; Sedikides & Skowronski, 1993). In the current project I address this empirical void by investigating the role of *evaluator* physical attractiveness (the Self-rated physical attractiveness of the individual evaluating the target) in the perception of and feelings about social targets who vary in physical attractiveness. In doing so, I merge relevant perspectives regarding (a) the impact of attractiveness on social judgment, (b) biased self-perceptions, and (c) the role of similarity in social perception.

Attractiveness Effects on Social Judgment

As discussed above, the physical attractiveness of a target influences a variety of evaluative and judgmental outcomes. The current project focused attention onto the impact of attractiveness on liking and personality inference.

Liking

Physical attractiveness (PA) is a powerful predictor of interpersonal attraction; in fact, early investigations of attraction suggested that PA was the single potent predictor of liking and romantic interest (Walster, Aronson, Abrahams, & Rottman, 1966). More recent studies have identified additional predictors of attraction (e.g., reciprocity, similarity, etc.); however, the importance of PA for predicting liking, as well as romantic attraction, is well established (Byrne, London, & Reeves, 1968; Li et al., 2002; Snyder et al., 1977; Stroebe et al., 1971; Timmerman, & Hewitt, 1980).

Personality Inferences

The physical attractiveness stereotype refers to a set of personality traits that are linked cognitively to attractiveness (Eagly et al., 1991). In an exhaustive meta-analysis of the physical attractiveness stereotype, Eagly and colleagues concluded that attractive, relative to unattractive, targets are consistently rated more favorably on social characteristics, such as popularity, social skills, and social confidence (also see Bassili, 1981; Dion et al., 1972; Dushenko, Perry, Schilling, & Smolarski, 1978; Eagly et al., 1991; Johnson & Pittenger, 1984), that the effect sizes for

intellectual competence, potency, and adjustment favor attractive individuals but are typically moderate, and that attractive and unattractive individuals are evaluated similarly on items related to integrity (honesty, concern for others, etc.). Interestingly, attractive individuals may be regarded as more vain and egotistical and as more likely than unattractive individuals to divorce or to engage in infidelity (Dermer & Thiel, 1975).

Recent theorizing regarding the physical attractiveness stereotype suggests that attractiveness is implicitly, and automatically, associated with a particular set of personality traits (Eagly et al., 1991) and that these associations result from direct observation and cultural (i.e., media) representations of attractive and unattractive individuals. The current project investigated the possibility that self-perceptions contribute to and/or qualify the personality traits one associates with physical attractiveness. Consistently with this possibility, Pelham and colleagues found that participants high in self-rated PA evaluated attractive targets more positively than participants low in self-rated PA (Pelham, Ly, & Hetts, 2002). This result provides preliminary evidence that the physical attractiveness stereotype varies as a function of self-perception.

Biased Self-Evaluations

How might self-perceptions explain the favor attractive individuals enjoy? Such explanation is grounded in the chronic valence of self-representations. Most individuals regard themselves positively (Schwartz, 1986), have high self-esteem (Taylor & Brown, 1988), and display attributional (Miller & Ross, 1975), memorial (Sedikides & Green, 2000), and evaluative biases that favor the self. People regard themselves as better than the average person (Alicke, 1985; Brown, 1986; Svenson, 1981) and more positively (1) than they are evaluated by others (Ruble, Eisenberg, & Higgins, 1994) and (2) than is warranted by objective criteria (Epley & Dunning, 2000; Gabriel, Critelli, & Ee, 1994). The pervasive tendency for self-promotion suggests that people will regard themselves as relatively attractive (as more attractive than the average person) and thus, as similar, on attractiveness, to attractive targets.

The perceptual similarity between the self and attractive targets that is a logical result of inflated self-perceptions of attractiveness creates ambiguity in the interpretation of research that has compared evaluations of attractive and unattractive individuals. Specifically, attractive targets are not only more attractive than unattractive targets; they are also more similar to the self. Given this confound, the conclusion that people are biased in favor of (or against) attractive targets because of the target's attractiveness, per se, is premature.

Self-Similarity

The association between similarity and attraction is among the most robust in the social psychological literature (see Byrne & Nelson, 1965, for a review). People regard favorably individuals with whom they share attitudes and characteristics (Duck & Craig, 1978; Rosenblatt & Greenberg, 1991; Sprecher & Duck, 1994) and even seem to be drawn to towns and occupations whose names are similar to their own (Pelham, Mirenberg, & Jones, 2002). There is also substantial evidence that similarity of physical attractiveness influences interpersonal evaluation and functioning.

Romantic partners and male-friend pairs are more similar on objective and self-rated physical attractiveness than would be expected by chance (Cash & Derlega,

1978; Feingold, 1988), and individuals choose romantic/dating partners whose physical attractiveness level is similar to their own (Berscheid, Dion, Walster, & Walster, 1971; Stroebe et al., 1970). Additionally, physical attractiveness similarity is a significant predictor of relationship progress (White, 1980) with more similar partners, relative to less similar partners, reporting greater increases in love over time. Taken together, these findings (commonly regarded as evidence for a "matching for attractiveness" phenomenon) suggest that physical attractiveness similarity is associated with interpersonal attraction and positive evaluation.

Overview

The current project assessed the importance of the evaluator's self-rated physical attractiveness (PA) and evaluator–target PA similarity on perceptions of targets who varied in PA. More specifically, I investigated the possibility that previous research regarding the impact of target PA on judgment has confused a bias for beauty with a bias for similarity.

The project includes a pilot study and an experiment. In the pilot study, I identified photographs of individuals who the population sampled in the subsequent experiment considered high, medium, or low in PA. In the main experiment participants completed self-assessments and made judgments about a male or female target who was high, medium, or low in PA. More specifically, participants expressed how much they would like the target and rated the target on various personality dimensions (e.g., sociability, integrity, potency, etc.).

The empirical foundation reviewed previously drives four hypotheses for the current research. First, I expected participants to regard themselves as more attractive than the average college student. Second, I expected that participants would regard themselves as most similar on attractiveness to relatively attractive individuals. Third, consistently with previous research regarding the impact of target attractiveness on judgment, I expected participants to express more liking for physically attractive, relative to unattractive, targets and to evaluate attractive targets more positively than less attractive targets on items related to sociability (e.g., assertiveness, extraversion, etc.) but not on items related to integrity (Eagly et al., 1991).

Finally, and most critically, I expected that participants would evaluate most favorably those targets who they viewed as similar to themselves on PA, independent of target PA. More specifically, I expected that (1) participants' Self-Rated PA would moderate the influence of target PA on evaluation such that participants high in self-rated PA (high-PA participants) would inflate evaluations of high-PA targets whereas participants low in self-rated PA (low-PA participants) would not, and (2) PA similarity would mediate the influence of target PA on target evaluation.[1]

Pilot Study

Twenty individuals (8 males and 12 females) who were unaware of research hypotheses and procedures rated 115 wallet-size photographs of 18–20 year-old males (59 pictures) and females (56 pictures) for PA. Raters evaluated each photograph on a seven-point scale (1 = "not at all attractive" and 7 = "very attractive"). Two male and two female photographs were chosen to represent each of three levels of PA: high, medium, and low. The two males ($Ms = 4.91$, 4.82) and two females ($Ms = 6.13$, 6.46) who were rated, on average, as most attractive were chosen

as high-PA targets.[2] The two males and two females who receivéd average ratings closest to the scale midpoint ($=4$) were selected as medium-PA targets (male medium target Ms $= 4.04$, 4.04; female medium target Ms $= 4.00$, 3.96). Finally, the two males and two females who received the lowest average ratings were selected as low-PA targets (male low targets, Ms $= 1.50$, 1.30; female low targets, Ms $= 1.92$, 1.89). There were no rater gender effects for the ratings of the 12 target individuals chosen (ps ranging from .11 to .89); male and female raters evaluated each of the targets similarly.

Method

Participants and Experimental Design

One hundred forty-two introductory psychology students at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill participated as partial fulfillment of a course option. The 65 men and 77 women were assigned randomly to one of six experimental conditions created by a 2 (Target Gender: male/female) $\times$ 3 (Target PA: high/medium/low) factorial design. I also included participant gender as a factor in all statistical analyses.

Measures

Target assessment. Participants (Ps) completed 16 items regarding the target person. One item assessed liking for the target ("I think I would like this person . . ."; endpoints, $1 = not\ at\ all$ and $10 = very\ much$). Twelve items tapped personality dimensions identified by previous research as relevant to the PA stereotype (popularity, honesty, intelligence, etc.). Ps rated the target on each item relative to other college students (endpoints, $1 = bottom\ 5\%$ and $10 = top\ 5\%$), and these 12 items were subjected to principal components analysis with direct oblimin rotation. This analysis revealed two factors that accounted for 63% of the variance. The factors displayed adequate simple structure prior to rotation and were interpreted as (1) sociability (adjustment, confidence, assertiveness, popularity, sociability, exciting) and (2) integrity (honesty, morality, concern for others, sincerity, intelligence, kindness). I created two composite indices by averaging items that loaded onto each factor (sociability: 6 items, alpha $= .86$; integrity: 6 items, alpha $= .89$). Ps also rated the target's PA relative to other college students (endpoints, $1 = bottom\ 5\%$ and $10 = top\ 5\%$) as a manipulation check.

Finally, participants completed an item regarding PA similarity to the target ("In reference to level of physical attractiveness, how similar to you is the pictured person?"; endpoints, $1 = not\ at\ all\ similar$ and $10 = very\ similar$) and an item assessing overall similarity to the target ("Overall, how similar to you do you think the pictured person is?"; endpoints, $1 = not\ at\ all\ similar$ and $10 = very\ similar$).

Self- and ideal self-assessments. Ps evaluated themselves relative to other college students on 10 dimensions including PA (endpoints, $1 = bottom\ 5\%$ and $10 = top\ 5\%$). Ps also evaluated their ideal selves, the kind of people they "would ideally like to be," on the same 10 dimensions.[3]

Procedure

The experimenter informed Ps that the experimental session would include multiple pilot studies that were unrelated to one another. Under this pretense, Ps completed self, ideal self, and target assessments in individual rooms. Ps were assigned randomly to evaluate either a male or a female target who was high,

medium, or low in PA. The order of the assessments (self, ideal self, and target assessments) was counterbalanced to control for order effects. Ps were under no time restrictions while completing assessments. The experimental session concluded with a full debriefing.

Results

Manipulation Check

I investigated Ps' ratings of target PA with a 2 (Participant Gender) × 2 (Target Gender) × 3 (Target PA) analysis of variance (ANOVA). The target PA effect was significant, $F(2, 130) = 39.75$, $p < .001$. Ps rated high-PA targets ($M = 7.48$, $SD = 1.79$) as more physically attractive than either medium ($M = 6.76$, $SD = 1.48$; Tukey's HSD $p < .08$) or low ($M = 4.60$, $SD = 1.59$; $p < .001$) PA targets. Ps regarded medium-PA targets as significantly more attractive than low-PA targets ($p < .001$). No other effects reached significance. Ps' ratings of the targets' PA confirmed the pilot ratings discussed previously.

Did Participants Regard Themselves as More Attractive than the Average College Student?

In order to investigate this hypothesis, I compared Ps' self-rated PA to the scale midpoint (5.5). As expected, Ps rated themselves, on average, significantly higher than the scale midpoint ($M = 6.81$, $SD = 1.27$), $t(141) = 12.33$, $p < .001$. There was no gender difference on self-rated PA, $t(140) = .58$, $p > .50$. Men ($M = 6.88$, $SD = 1.23$) and women ($M = 6.75$, $SD = 1.30$) evaluated themselves similarly on attractiveness. Interestingly, only 18 of the 142 Ps rated themselves in the bottom 50% of college students with regard to PA.

Did Participants Regard Themselves as More Similar (on Attractiveness) to Attractive Targets?

I created a PA similarity index (hereafter referred to as "similarity index") by (1) subtracting each participant's rating of target PA from his or her self-rating of PA and (2) taking the absolute value of each difference. The similarity index constituted a unidirectional measure of perceptual distance between self and target PA ratings (see Duck, 1973; Duck & Craig, 1978) and served as the dependent measure in the analyses described here and as the mediator in analyses described below.[4]

I subjected the similarity index to the 2 × 2 × 3 ANOVA. The expected target PA main effect was significant, $F(2, 130) = 5.37$, $p < .01$. Ps rated high-PA ($M = 1.60$, $SD = 1.09$) and medium-PA($M = 1.57$, $SD = 1.35$) targets more similarly to the self on attractiveness than they did low-PA targets ($M = 2.44$, $SD = 1.77$), Tukey's p's $< .02$ and .01, respectively. Index scores for high- and medium-PA targets were not significantly different, $p > .75$.

Did Participants Evaluate Attractive Targets More Positively on Sociability and Liking But Not on Integrity?

I subjected sociability and integrity composite indices and liking to the 2 × 2 × 3 (Target PA) ANOVA. The target PA main effect was significant for the three outcome measures, and the patterns of effects were generally consistent with expectations.[5]

With regards to sociability, Ps rated high-PA targets as more sociable than both medium- and low-PA targets, Tukey's p's $< .01$ and .001, respectively, and rated

TABLE 1   Target Evaluation as a Function of Target Physical Attractiveness

	Target attractiveness		
Outcome measure	High	Medium	Low
Sociability	7.34a (1.10)	6.64b (.97)	5.56c (1.05)
Integrity	6.36b (1.06)	7.10a (1.18)	6.89a (1.08)
Liking	6.68ab (1.61)	6.96a (1.86)	6.05b (1.46)

Note. All main effects reached significance. Means within each row that do not share a subscript differ significantly ($p < .05$). Standard deviations are given in parentheses.

medium-PA targets as more sociable than low-PA targets, $p < .001$, target PA main effect $F(2, 128) = 33.66$, $p < .001$ (see Table 1 for Means and Standard Deviations). For integrity, Ps evaluated medium and low-PA targets more favorably than high-PA targets, Tukey's post-hoc p's $< .01$ and $< .05$, respectively. Ratings of medium-PA and low-PA targets did not differ significantly, $p > .55$, target PA main effect, $F(2, 128) = 5.50$, $p < .01$. Finally, for liking, Ps regarded medium-PA targets as significantly more likable than low-PA targets, $p < .02$. Additionally, Ps rated high-PA targets as descriptively more likable than low-PA targets, though the post-hoc comparison did not reach significance, $p > .25$, target PA main effect $F(2, 128) = 14.24$, $p < .02$.

Did Self-Rated PA Moderate the Influence of Target PA on Evaluation?

In order to test for moderation, I subjected each outcome measure to a four-factor, factorial ANOVA. Participant gender, target gender, and target PA were categorical factors, whereas self-rated PA was continuous. I centered self-rated PA and each outcome measure. As a reminder, I expected that that Ps high in self-rated PA (high-PA Ps) would inflate evaluations of high-PA targets whereas low-PA Ps would not. Where appropriate, I computed predicted outcome values for hypothetical participants 1 standard deviation above and below the mean of self-rated PA.

In each analysis, the target PA main effect reached significance. These effects were similar to those reported previously, and thus, I do not discuss them further and focus attention here on the crucial higher-order effects.

Sociability. When investigating perceptions of sociability, the expected self-rated PA × target PA was marginal, $F(2, 116) = 2.95$, $p < .06$. Both high- and low-PA targets evaluated high-PA targets as most sociable and low-PA targets as least sociable; however, high-PA Ps inflated ratings of high-PA targets to a greater degree than did low-PA Ps (see Table 2 for predicted values). Within the high-PA target condition, the relation between self-rated PA and sociability ratings was marginal, $B = .28$, $t = 1.82$, $p < .08$. The more positive a participant's self-rated PA, the more sociable he or she regarded the attractive target. The relation between self-rated PA and sociability ratings did not reach significance in either the medium-PA, $B = .06$, $t = .48$, $p > .40$, or low-PA, $B = -.20$, $t = -1.53$, $p > .10$, target conditions. No other effects involving self-rated PA approached significance.

Integrity. For perceptions of integrity, the self-rated PA × Target Pa interaction was significant, $F(2, 116) = 4.97$, $p < .01$. Consistently with expectations, high-Pa Ps evaluated high-PA targets significantly more favorably than did low-PA Ps (see Table 2), $B = .33$, $t = 2.19$, $p < .05$. In contrast, low-PA Ps evaluated medium-PA

targets more favorably than did high-PA Ps, $B = -.22$, $t = -1.95$, $p < .06$.[6] in the low-PA target condition the relation between self-rated PA and integrity ratings did not approach significance, $B = .08$, $t = .72$, $p > .45$.

Interestingly, the significant self-rated PA × target PA interaction was qualified by a three-way interaction among participant gender, self-rated PA, and target PA, $F(2, 116) = 4.27$, $p < .02$. The interaction between self-rated PA and target PA was significant for male Ps, $F(2, 52) = 5.10$, $p < .01$, but was not significant for female Ps, $F(2, 64) = 1.02$, $p < .40$. Predicted values for the significant interaction indicate that high-PA male Ps, relative to low-PA male Ps, were particularly favorable towards high-PA targets and unfavorable toward medium-PA targets.

Liking. With regard to liking for the target, the critical self-rated PA × target PA interaction was significant, $F(2, 116) = 6.87$, $p < .01$. As expected, high-PA Ps expressed the most liking for high-PA targets and the least liking for low-PA targets (Table 2). Additionally, these Ps evaluated high-PA targets more favorably than did low-PA Ps, $B = .59$, $t = 3.32$, $p < .01$. In contrast, low-PA Ps expressed the most liking for medium-PA targets and the least liking for high-PA targets; two non-significant trends suggested that these Ps were more favorable towards medium-PA, $B = -.32$, $t = -1.62$, $p = .12$ and low-PA, $B = -.27$, $t = -1.52$, $p = .14$, targets than were high-PA Ps.

In summary, participants who regarded themselves as attractive were more favorable towards high-PA targets than were participants who did not hold themselves in such high regard. The nature of the personality inferences participants made about attractive and unattractive targets varied as a function of self-perceptions. Further, the results are consistent with the notion that attractiveness similarity contributes to differential perceptions of attractive and unattractive individuals.

Does Attractiveness Similarity Mediate the Influence of Target Attractiveness on Interpersonal Evaluation?

To investigate the possibility that attractiveness similarity explains the influence of target PA on evaluation, I investigated the potential mediation of the target PA–

TABLE 2 Predicted Values for Hypothetical Individuals 1 SD Above and Below the Mean for Self-Rated Physical Attractiveness as a Function of Target Attractiveness

	Target attractiveness		
Outcome measure	High	Medium	Low
Sociability			
High self-rated PA	7.61	6.76	5.28
Low self-rated PA	6.91	6.62	5.77
Integrity			
High self-rated PA	6.71	6.76	7.00
Low self-rated PA	5.86	7.31	6.80
Liking			
High self-rated PA	7.32	6.56	5.61
Low self-rated PA	5.83	7.36	6.30

evaluation link by the similarity index. Using a series of regression analyses, I tested the four mediation steps outlined by Baron and Kenney (1986): the IV must predict (a) the DV (Step 1) and (b) the potential mediator (Step 2), the potential mediator must predict the DV (Step 3), and when both the IV and the potential mediator are in the model, the mediator must predict the DV significantly while the influence of the IV must be significantly reduced (Step 4).

In order to test for indirect effects of the IV on the DV via the mediator, it was necessary to calculate a single estimate for the influence of target PA (the IV) on the similarity index (the potential mediator) and on each outcome measure (the DVs). Because target PA was a three-level categorical variable, it could not be represented by a single variable in a regression analysis. Therefore, I created two orthogonal contrasts to represent the three-level factor and focused my analysis on the contrast comparing evaluations of high- and low-PA targets.[7] For each analyses described below, the contrast comparing high-PA versus low-PA target was the IV and the similarity index was the potential mediator. Importantly, Ps regarded high-PA targets as more similar to themselves on PA than they did low-PA targets, $B = -.41$, $t = -2.77$, $p < .01$, effectively fulfilling a mediational criterion (Step 2) for each model. Analyses specific to each outcome measure are presented below.

Sociability. Ps rated high-PA targets as significantly more sociable than low-PA targets, $B = .88$, $t = 8.15$, $p < .001$ (Step 1), and the similarity index predicted sociability ratings significantly, $B = -.28$, $t = -4.05$, $p < .001$ (Step 3): the more similar to the self a target was rated on PA, the more sociable that target was perceived to be. When including the similarity index in the full model (including target gender, participant gender, and target PA contrasts), both the high- versus low-PA contrast, $B = .81$, $t = 7.48$, $p < .001$, and the similarity index, $B = -.15$, $t = -2.43$, $p < .02$, predicted sociability ratings significantly. The indirect effect was marginal, $z = 1.77$, $p < .08$ (Step 4). Though attractiveness similarity did not mediate the target PA effect, it did play a unique role in perceptions of sociability.

Integrity. Ps rated low-PA targets as having significantly more integrity than high-PA targets, $B = -.25$, $t = -2.36$, $p < .02$ (Step 1); however, the similarity index did not predict integrity ratings significantly, $B = -.09$, $t = -1.41$, $p > .15$ (Step 3). This latter result effectively derailed the mediation under investigation; however, I proceeded with the complete analysis for exploratory purposes. Not surprisingly, when the similarity index was included in the full model, the high- versus low-PA contrast was significant, $B = -.30$, $t = -2.64$, $p < .01$, but the similarity index was not, $B = -.05$, $t = -.70$, $p > .45$. The indirect effect was not significant, $z = 1.20$, $p > .20$ (Step 4). Attractiveness similarity did not mediate the influence of target PA on integrity ratings.

Liking. Finally, Ps liked high-PA targets more than low-PA targets, $B = .36$, $t = 2.21$, $p < .03$ (Step 1), and the similarity index predicted liking significantly, $B = -.41$, $t = -4.44$, $p < .001$ (Step 3): the more similar to the self a target was rated on PA, the more the participant liked the target. When including the similarity index in the full model, the high versus low-PA contrast was rendered non-significant, $B = .18$, $t = 1.19$, $p > .20$, the similarity index was significant, $B = -.41$, $t = -4.70$, $p < .001$, and the indirect effect was significant, $z = 2.35$, $p < .02$ (Step 4). Attractiveness similarity completely mediated the influence of target PA on liking.[8]

Discussion

In an effort to investigate the role of self-perception in the evaluation of targets who varied in physical attractiveness, participants completed self-assessments and expressed liking for and made personality inferences about male or female targets who were high, medium, or low in attractiveness. Consistently with expectations, participants regarded themselves as more attractive than the average college student and as more similar on attractiveness to attractive, rather than unattractive, targets. These results are consistent with the self-promotion literature (e.g., Alicke, 1985) and confirmed that PA similarity is a potential confound in investigations of the link between PA and attraction and/or personality inference.

As expected, the impact of target attractiveness on target evaluation was profound; however, the influence of the self was also unmistakable. The physical attractiveness stereotype (i.e., inferences regarding the sociability and integrity of the target) was contingent upon self-perception. Participants who rated themselves highly on attractiveness regarded attractive targets as more sociable (marginally so) and as having more integrity than did those participants who regarded themselves as less attractive. On the other hand, participants who rated themselves as relatively unattractive were more positively disposed to less attractive targets.

Interestingly, self-perceptions had a particularly profound effect on liking for the targets. Self-rated attractiveness moderated the impact of target attractiveness in the expected manner: attractive participants liked attractive targets the most, whereas less attractive participants favored less attractive targets. Also, attractiveness similarity completely mediated the influence of target attractiveness on liking. That is, there was not a significant effect of target attractiveness on liking once I accounted for attractiveness similarity. Increased affection for attractive people was a function of similarity, and not of beauty. This result is particularly striking given the critical role that physical attractiveness is presumed to play in interpersonal attraction.

Interpretation

There are at least two perspectives that offer insight into the role of self-perception in judgments of attractive and unattractive individuals. Speaking first about inferences of sociability and integrity, previous discussions of the physical attractiveness stereotype suggest that the stereotype originates in implicit personality theories (Ashmore, 1981) that are formed via (1) direct observation of attractive and unattractive individuals and (2) cultural representations of attractive and unattractive people (Eagly et al., 1991). Following from this perspective, the moderation of personality inferences about attractive targets by self-rated attractiveness likely reflects different implicit theories that attractive and unattractive individuals have formed via observation and experience. Though attractive and unattractive people are likely exposed to similar cultural influences, attractive individuals may have had more positive interactions with physically attractive people and may have observed these people in a more positive light than have unattractive participants (possibly as a result of attractiveness similarity itself), thus creating more positive implicit personality theories. Indeed, the influence of self-perception on personality inference seems to be embedded in well-learned cognitive structures, and these cognitive structures may develop differently as a function of one's attractiveness and possibly as a function of egoistic motives that influence one's perceptions of attractive and unattractive individuals. Such a possibility is interesting fodder for future research.

While implicit personality theories do well to explain the role of the self in personality inference, it is rather unlikely that such cognitive structures can account adequately for the role of the self in expressions of liking for others. After all, judgments of liking reflect how one *feels* about someone else, are, thus, affective in nature, and may be relatively independent of objective assessment of a target's characteristics (see Byrne, 1971, for a discussion of the affective nature of attraction). One interpretation of the data regarding liking judgments is that implicit, automatic, and positive feelings about the self (implicit egotism, see Pelham, Mirenberg, & Jones, 2002) influence attraction via affective, effortless responses. When evaluating a target who is similar to the self, implicit egotism translates into a positive emotional response to the similar target (i.e., I feel good about myself, and thus, I feel good about those like me). The positive emotional response, in turn, drives affection for the target (see Clore & Tamir, 2002; Martin, Abend, Sedikides, & Green, 1997, for reviews regarding the impact of affect on judgment). In fact, the transfer of positive feelings regarding the self to a similar target may also combine with the implicit theories discussed previously to contribute to inferences about sociability and integrity.

It is important to note that the potential influence of implicit egotism depends upon the assumption that most of the participants in the current project had positive automatic associations with the self. Though I present no data to support this contention, previous work suggests that this assumption is valid (see Pelham, Mirenberg, & Jones, 2002; Schwartz, 1986; Taylor & Brown, 1988). Future research would do well to investigate the impact of attractiveness similarity in those individuals who have less positive, or even negative, automatic self-associations. If implicit egotism accounts for the influence of attractiveness similarity, such an investigation should yield findings that differ markedly, or are even contradictory, to the findings reported here, with such participants not manifesting a bias for similar others.

Further Empirical Inquiry

Beyond questions of the mechanism driving the current results, there are a number of other empirical queries to which this project leads. First, is the influence of attractiveness similarity unique? Previous research has confirmed that personality similarity is associated with interpersonal attraction (e.g., Byrne, Griffitt, & Stefaniak, 1967); however, few investigations have considered the role of similarity on individual personality traits. We are left to wonder whether information regarding a target individual's sociability or integrity might create perceptual similarity that would confer onto the target the same benefits as attractiveness similarity.

Second, the moderation of the target attractiveness effect by self-rated attractiveness raises the question of a dispositional characteristic that might differentiate between those who rate themselves relatively favorably on attractiveness and those who do not. Dispositional narcissism (Morf & Rhodewalt, 2001; Raskin & Hall, 1979) may be just such a characteristic. Narcissists, to a greater degree than nonnarcissists, evaluate themselves as more attractive (1) than the average person and (2) than is warranted by objective criteria (Gabriel et al., 1994). Narcissists also tend to base interpersonal judgments on physical attractiveness (Campbell, 1999). Accordingly, dispositional narcissism may be a critical factor that underlies self-perceptions (of attractiveness as well as other characteristics), which, in turn, impact target judgment.

Conclusions

This project revisits the physical attractiveness stereotype and the attractiveness-attraction link and provides evidence for the critical role of self-perceptions in affection for and personality inferences about attractive and unattractive individuals. The data indicate that the physical attractiveness stereotype is robust, but that the specific content of the stereotype varies as a function of self-perception. Additionally, relative affection for attractive individuals, a finding that has been documented extensively by previous researchers (Byrne et al., 1968; Snyder et al., 1977), was a function of similarity rather than target attractiveness per se. While I would not argue that attractiveness plays no role in attraction (possibly a potent role in romantic attraction rather than "liking"), these data do suggest that attractiveness similarity is an important variable to consider when investigating attraction as a function of target physical attractiveness.

More generally, the project contributes to our understanding of the way that self-perceptions influence target evaluation. The project leaves open questions regarding dispositional and motivational mechanisms that might drive these results; however, I hope that these data inspire further inquiries into the influence of similarity, the role of implicit egotism, and the dynamic interplay of dispositional, self-evaluative, and social factors in interpersonal judgment. As such investigations proceed, researchers interested in the impact of attractiveness on judgment and behavior might practice a new idiom: What is beautiful may be good, but what is beautiful like me is even better.

Notes

1. It is important to note that I focused on self-ratings of PA rather than objective ratings of evaluator PA. Objective ratings of evaluator PA tend to exert limited influence on target evaluations (e.g., Dermer & Thiel, 1975), and more importantly, self-rated PA is relatively more predictive of important psychological factors than are objective ratings of PA (Feingold, 1992). The unique phenomenological experience of one's own attractiveness is an appropriate self-assessment when investigating the role of the self in target evaluation.

2. The astute reader will notice that the high-PA male targets were rated as relatively low on attractiveness, as compared to the high-PA female targets. However, for my purposes, it was most critical that high-PA targets be regarded as more attractive than medium-PA targets (and, accordingly, low-PA targets), within each gender. The chosen photographs fulfilled this objective. The pictures chosen to represent high-PA men were regarded as more attractive than those chosen to represent medium-PA men (pairwise comparison p's ranging from .003 to .028).

3. Previous researchers (e.g., Wetzel & Insko, 1982) have suggested that ideal self-similarity, rather than similarity to the actual self, is the most potent predictor of attraction. I analyzed the current data with and without controlling for ideal self-similarity. Importantly, statistical conclusions regarding the role of target PA and the mediating role of evaluator-target PA similarity were the same in both sets of analyses. Thus, ideal self-similarity is not discussed further.

4. I used the similarity index, and not the PA similarity item, as the dependent measure and potential mediator because I believed the similarity index to be free of an important source of on-line bias. Specifically, previous research suggests that individuals will rate themselves (on single-item measures) as more similar to attractive, rather than unattractive, targets. This result may be due to inflated self-beliefs, but it may also be due to momentary fits of the self-enhancement need (i.e., "I bolster

myself by rating myself as similar to this attractive individual"). For exploratory purposes, I conducted each analysis involving attractiveness similarity with the PA similarity item, rather than the similarity index. The results of these exploratory analyses were exactly similar to those reported in the text (results available from the author).

5. The three-factor analysis revealed a number of target gender and participant gender effects. These effects are less critical to the goals of this project and thus, are not discussed in detail. In general, participants were more favorable toward opposite, rather than same, gender targets. Attractiveness mattered more for female, rather than male, targets, and target attractiveness was more influential when participants evaluated opposite, rather than same, gender targets. These differences are unique in a literature in which significant target or participant gender effects have been rare (e.g., Dion et al., 1972). More specific data regarding target gender and participant gender effects are available from the author.

6. Given the fact that 1 standard deviation below the self-rated PA mean translated into an absolute self-rating of 5.65 (on a 10 point scale), the fact that low-PA participants inflated evaluations of medium-PA targets is consistent with expectations.

7. Each regression included a main effect contrast for participant gender (coded 1, -1 for male and female, respectively), a main effect contrast for target gender (1, -1), two main effect contrasts for target PA (high: 1, .5, medium: 0, -1, low: -1, .5), and contrasts representing the interactions of the three factors (e.g., the participant gender contrast crossed with each of the target PA contrasts). Standard errors were computed using Goodman's (1960) method (in which the product of the standard errors of the two paths are added to the denominator term).

8. I investigated mediation in two additional ways. First, I used analysis of covariance in which target PA was a three-level categorical predictor. This analysis yielded conclusions similar to those reported in the text and is available upon request. Additionally, I computed indirect effects using participants' ratings of their target's PA as a continuous predictor and participant and target gender (both coded 1, -1) as categorical predictors. Similarly to the analyses reported in the text, the indirect effect of target PA via the similarity index on liking was significant, $z = 2.42$, $p < .05$; however, the indirect effects on sociability and integrity were not significant, $z = .88$ and .93, respectively ($ps > .05$).

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