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The Halo Effect and Religiosity: Are Attractive People Perceived as More Religious?

A photograph rating study assessed religiosity perceptions relating to the halo effect. The halo effect is a phenomenon describing the tendency that people have to attribute positive characteristics to those possessing other, unrelated positive characteristics. In the preliminary study, subjects from BYU rated the attractiveness of photographs of college-aged men and women. The primary study used the photographs with the highest and lowest attractiveness ratings. Subjects rated them on a scale of perceived religiosity. As hypothesized, attractive females received higher religiosity ratings than unattractive females. Attractive males received higher religiosity ratings than unattractive males. Attractive females received the highest religiosity ratings. This study adds evidence that attractiveness affects the perceptions of religiosity as predicted by the halo effect theory.

Many times a day, people make quick judgments even when information is limited. The basis of these judgments comprise of the person's own past experiences, including experiences that are not easily recalled in conscious memory. This process of judging is known as implicit cognition. When these judgments are made regarding other people in a social context, particularly regarding their character, the judgments are known as implicit social cognition (Greenwald & Banaji, 1995). One aspect of implicit social cognition is the halo effect, a term first used by Edward Thorndike. He discovered that people who had certain positive traits, such as a pleasant voice, were more commonly perceived as having other positive characteristics, such as kindness (Greenwald & Banaji, 1995). Succeeding studies about the halo effect have focused on the role of perceived attractiveness. Those who are more physically attractive are viewed as having more positive traits (Abel & Watters, 2005).

Attractive people are perceived as having traits that lead to success in school and in the workplace. In school settings attractive people are considered to be more intelligent and have more initiative (Chia, Allred, Grossnickle, & Lee, 1998). These individuals are also perceived as having a higher level of success in school performance. Studies have shown that readers will rate essays more preferably if they believe the author to be attractive (Olson & Marshuetz, 2005; Reed, 1999). In employment situations, the halo effect causes people to notice traits that are useful for success in the workplace. Because attractive people are perceived as having more

intelligence and initiative, employers are more likely to hire those they deem attractive, even when other applicants are equally qualified (Chia, et al., 1998).

In addition to achievement, attractive individuals are perceived as having positive traits such as interpersonal skills and moral values, which lead to success in social contexts. Perceived interpersonal skills and traits that have been linked with attractiveness include persuasive communication (Brownlow, 1992), extraversion, and an increased likelihood to receive votes when running for election (Riniolo, Johnson, Sherman, & Miso, 2006). Attractive individuals are also perceived as having higher moral values, including trustworthiness (Darby & Jeffers, 1988). The perceived expectancy of having higher moral values affects the way others react to them. People are more willing to disclose personal information to attractive people and be more honest around them (Reed, 1999). Also, people are more likely to help those that are considered attractive (Harrell, 1978; Riniolo et al., 2006).

Additionally, the halo effect predicts that attractive people will be perceived as having other positive morals. This is shown in a study by Dion, Berscheid and Walster (1972), where they examined the idea that "physical beauty is the sign of an interior beauty, a spiritual and moral beauty" (p. 285). Spiritual and moral beauty are traits generally associated with being religious.

Meta-analysis of halo effect studies has shown that attractive women are seen as having more positive traits than attractive men (Eagly, Ashmore, Makhijani & Longo, 1991). For example, explicit verbal statements in

television commercials link beauty and good outcomes more commonly with females than with males (Eagly, et al., 1991). Darby and Jeffers (1988) asked subjects to rate photographs of women based on the likelihood that those women had committed a specific crime. The women who were more attractive were more likely to be judged by the subjects as being innocent of the crime, more likely to receive a lesser punishment, and more likely to be perceived as happier and intelligent. In addition, a recent study (Ross, 2004) showed that subjects rated attractive females as more feminine than unattractive females, whereas the perceived masculinity of attractive and unattractive males was equal. These examples demonstrate the cultural perception that feminine beauty is commonly linked to positive traits.

A shortcoming of halo effect studies is that male targets have been largely neglected, even when, in the general population, the studied trait is more commonly expressed in males. In the study examining perceived criminality, males and females were shown photographs only consisting of women (Darby & Jeffers, 1988). Because of the disproportionate use of female targets over male targets in halo effect studies, there is a general imbalance in the literature (Greenwald, 1995). In order to add to the literature, our study compensated for this imbalance by including male targets as well as female targets.

We tested physical beauty as it relates to spiritual and moral beauty, narrowly defined as religiosity. We operationally defined religiosity as being morally virtuous and showing belief in and reverence for God. We hypothesized that perceived attractiveness would increase the subjects' perception of religiosity in both sexes. We also hypothesized, based on past research, that this attractiveness-based increase would be greater in female targets.

Method

Participants

The two groups of subjects recruited for this study served as attractiveness raters and religiosity raters, respectively. The first group consisted of 47 students and the second group consisted of 57 students, all recruited from undergraduate BYU courses.

Materials. All photographs were headshots taken from a photograph database kept by Dr. Mark Allen of BYU students (class of 2002) who gave consent to have their photographs used in psychological studies. The images were loaded into a computer display program for sequential viewing. A scale corresponding to each photograph appeared on the screen where subjects could select a rating from a six-point scale. The experiments were carried out in multiple sessions in BYU computer labs, equipped with 40 personal computers. The instructions for completing the ratings (as well as a definition of religiosity in the context of our study for the religiosity raters) were projected onto a large screen in the lab. All subjects were offered candy as compensation.

Procedure

Subjects read and signed consent forms prior to participation. Instructions for completion of the study were projected on a large screen. The subjects were allowed to proceed at their own pace while viewing each photograph. The attractiveness raters were asked to rate the attractiveness of the targets in 120 photographs. They rated the photographs according to a six-point scale ranging from highly unattractive to highly attractive based upon their impressions of the targets. From the rating scores of the 120 photographs, we selected a sub-set of 80 photographs with ratings that fell most consistently at either extreme of the scale range, which served as target stimuli for the religiosity raters. This selected sub-set consisted of a balanced proportion of 20 males and 20 females falling nearest the upper end of the scale, and 20 males and 20 females falling nearest the lower end of the scale.

The religiosity raters were explicitly not told that the photographs had previously been rated for attractiveness, nor were they informed that attractiveness had any role to play in this experiment in any other way. After being shown an operational definition of religiosity, raters began assigning ratings on a six-point scale ranging from not religious to extremely religious. Each religiosity rater was shown all 80 photographs, and thus the independent variables of gender and attractiveness were repeated measures variables in a 2x2 complex design. The photographs were shown one at a time in a random order that was different for each subject.

Results

The raw data from each condition were compiled and inspected for outlier scores. As a result, 80 data points were eliminated from the analysis, due to 1 participant scoring the same throughout the entire survey. The remaining data were analyzed with a two-way ANOVA. The analysis revealed a main effect for both gender [$F(4, 63) = 9.05$; $p < 0.003$] and attractiveness [$F(4, 63) = 150.99$; $p < .00001$] factors. However, the interaction between the gender factor and the attractiveness factor was not significant [$F(4, 63) = 0.46$; $p < 3.84$].

An inspection of the data reveals that the differences in means between the attractive and unattractive groups and the males and females, while small, are statistically significant. The mean for the attractive group ($M=4.19$) was significantly higher than that of the unattractive group ($M=4.10$; $p < .004$). The mean for the females ($M=4.33$) was significantly higher than the mean of the males ($M=3.96$; $p < .001$). See Figure 1.

Discussion

We hypothesized that perceived attractiveness would increase the subjects' perception of religiosity in both sexes. The principle findings are that (a) attractive

targets had a higher religiosity rating than unattractive targets, and (b) female targets had a higher religiosity rating than male targets. The analysis of variance (ANOVA) test indicates that attractiveness was a significant factor in predicting perceived religiosity.

The finding that attractive targets received a higher rating than their unattractive counterparts was consistent with our hypothesis. These results add to past halo-effect studies which indicate that attractive individuals are perceived as having other unrelated, positive traits. More specifically, this finding supported the work of Dion et al. (1972), which stated that physical beauty is related to an interior, moral beauty, such as religiosity. This perception is manifested in our study through a higher religiosity rating for attractive people.

A closer look at each group's relation to the halo effect and our hypothesis revealed that both groups of female targets (attractive and unattractive) had a higher religiosity rating than either group of male targets. This supported our hypothesis on a cross-gender level and reaffirms that females are attributed with more positive characteristics than males.

Our study had two possible confounds. One confound was that the clothing and accessories worn by the targets could have affected the results. We did not control for the formality of targets' clothing. In a study by Brase and Richmond, it was shown that formal attire increased perceptions of trustworthiness in physicians (2004). Considering the possibility that formal attire af-

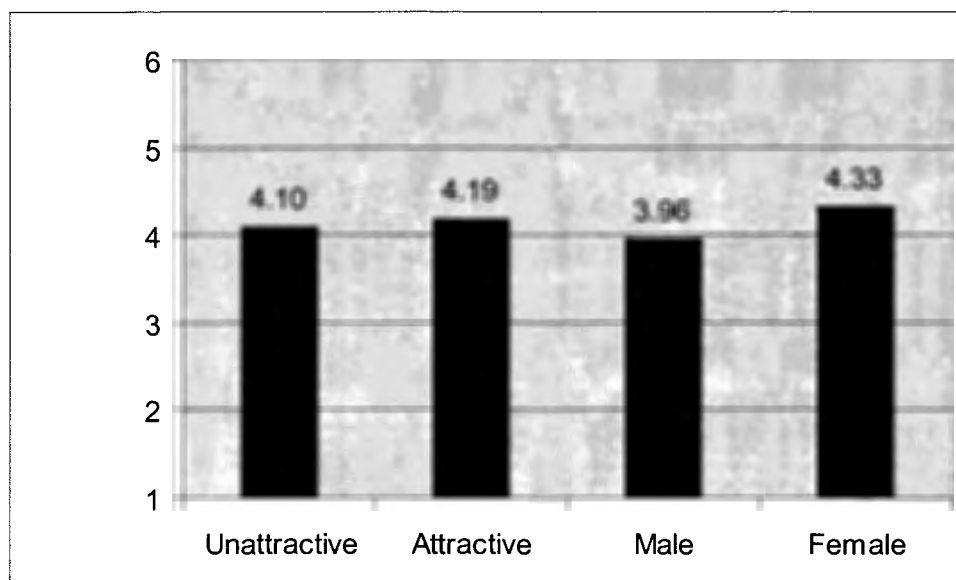


Figure 1. *The mean perceived religiosity scores across attractiveness and gender.*

affected our ratings, we reviewed the photographs used in our study. We found a difference between the attire of attractive and unattractive females. We defined formally dressed as those wearing button-front collared shirts and the less formal as t-shirts. Generally, attractive females were wearing more formal clothing. A higher level of formality may have resulted in increased perceptions of religiosity. Additionally, accessories provided cues upon which perceptions may have been based. A notable example of this in our study was two female targets who were wearing religious medallions, which likely increased the subjects' perceptions of their religiosity.

A second confound in our study was the subjects' aversion to giving low attractiveness and religiosity ratings to targets. Two of the participants told the researcher that they felt they should not be making judgments about others. This aversion may have been caused by the religious atmosphere of the university attended by the majority of subjects. BYU is a religiously oriented university, where all students are required to take religion courses and ninety-eight percent have the same religious affiliation. A tenant of this religion is the belief that judgments should not be based upon outward appearance, which is what our study required participants to do. Some of the subjects expressed they experienced discomfort making judgments about the photographs in this manner. Because of this, subjects may have avoided giving low ratings to the photographs, causing our data points to generally be in the middle and upper parts of the scale.

A potential limitation of our study was that some of our subjects were familiar with targets in the photographs they were asked to rate. Based on post-experiment statements from subjects, we estimate this affected <1% of our 4480 data points. These data points were not excluded from our raw data because ratings were not linked to subjects' identity and we could not determine which data points were affected. This limitation posed a problem because participants were asked to rate the photographs solely on appearance. Because some participants knew targets personally, factors other than appearance likely influenced the way they rated the photographs.

The results of the present study may have implications about how society makes judgments of others based on stereotypes. The more people realize how and why society follows these stereotypes, the more likely individuals will be able to change their behavior.

Furthermore, the implications of this study could also affect the way people choose to present themselves. When individuals understand how their appearance affects the way they are perceived, then they can present themselves in the way they want to be perceived.

Future research should consider that people base their first impressions on more than a photograph. Mannerisms, speech, and body language all play a factor in the way people are perceived. Using photographs allows for high control in the studies, but the validity is reduced. We suggest that future research focus on implicit social cognition based on real people instead of a photograph, creating more validity. This would expand the understanding of how perceived religiosity is influenced by the halo effect.

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