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Attribution of Personality Based on Attractiveness

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Literature Review

Whether individuals admit it or not, we have a tendency to judge strangers' characters based on their facial structure, attractiveness, clothing, gait, and their overall appearance (Pivonkova, Rubesova, Lindova, & Havlicek, 2011). The preference for beauty has permeated culture and has been perceived as a great power which influences almost every aspect of our social lives (Griffin & Langlois, 2006). The underlying cause of this influence can be deemed the "halo effect" as named by Thorndike (Pivonkova et al., 2011). The halo effect is described as the tendency of attributing positive traits to attractive persons, especially prosocial characteristics such as extroversion, agreeableness, and trustworthiness (Griffin & Langlois, 2006; Pivonkova et al., 2011; Principe & Langlois, 2011).

In a study with children, attractive children were perceived as having more positive traits such as independence and self-sufficiency, while unattractive children were described as antisocial, aggressive, nonconforming, and "scary" (Dion & Berscheid, 1974).

According to Lemay, Clark, and Greenberg (2010), positive emotional responses to attractiveness are primed, suggesting that one's reactions are automatic. This is supported by neurological evidence that the medial orbitofrontal cortex is stimulated by the presentation of attractive stimuli. This area is associated with other rewarding stimuli (Lemay et al., 2010).

This information leads into the current study which is very similar to a study done by Lemay and colleagues (2010). They proposed that because individuals desire close relationships with attractive persons, they would have a greater tendency to project one's own desires and goals onto attractive persons who may have the qualities that are attuned to said goals. The results of their study suggested that one's own affiliation motivation predicts one's perception of the target's qualities and traits. In the study, the participants attributed more positive traits such as extroversion, kindness, and generosity to those targets that were perceived as attractive (Lemay et al., 2010). The current study attempted to explore the extent to which personality traits are attributed to attractive persons based on one's own personality and if any other correlations may exist.

Research Focus

This study sought to explore the relationship between attractiveness and extroversion attribution as well as the relationship between the raters' own levels of extroversion, agreeableness, conscientiousness, and neuroticism and the level of extroversion to which they attributed to attractive and unattractive targets.

Participants

The 162 participants, 51 males and 111 females, were undergraduate students from a Midwestern University. The age range was 18 to 21 with 92% Caucasians, 1.2% African Americans, 1.8% Asians, 1.8% Hispanics, and 3% other.

Method

We obtained a sample of 30 photographs of Caucasian women's faces and had 14 randomly selected student judges (7 males, 7 females) rate the photographs according to attractiveness on a scale of 1 to 10 in increasing attractiveness. From that sample, the two highest (A1 and A2) and two lowest (U1 and U2) scored photographs were taken and used for the actual study. The participants were shown the four photographs and told to rate each photograph on a five-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 being "disagree strongly" to 5 being "agree strongly." The photographs were rated according to 20 BFI personality statements which focused exclusively on extroversion with some filler items. The participants then took the complete BFI which rated themselves on each of the "Big Five" personality traits.

Results

- No differences were found between males and females in personality attribution.
- There were low but significant positive correlations between the rater's level of conscientiousness and the attribution of extroversion for A1 ($r = .253, p < .01$) and A2 ($r = .182, p < .05$).
- There were negative correlations between the rater's conscientiousness and the attribution of extroversion for U1 ($r = -.174, p < .05$) and U2 ($r = -.105$, not significant).
- For U2 there was a significant negative correlation ($r = -.157, p < .05$) between extroversion of the rater and the attribution of extroversion.
- For A2 there was a non-significant positive correlation ($r = .13$) between extroversion of the rater and the attribution of extroversion.
- For A1 and U1 there were no significant correlations between extroversion of the rater and the attribution of extroversion.

Table 1: Mean & Standard Deviation of BFI Scores

		<i>n</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>			<i>n</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Extraversion (U1)	M	51	3.09	0.88	Extraversion (Self)	M	51	3.23	0.84
	F	111	2.86	0.92		F	111	3.39	0.86
Extraversion (A1)	M	51	3.2	0.75	Agreeableness (Self)	M	51	3.86	0.63
	F	111	3.38	0.86		F	111	4.02	0.53
Extraversion (A2)	M	51	3.44	0.77	Conscientiousness (Self)	M	51	3.53	0.6
	F	111	3.52	0.9		F	111	3.81	0.56
Extraversion (U2)	M	51	2.8	0.71	Neuroticism (Self)	M	51	2.52	0.81
	F	111	2.58	0.79		F	111	2.9	0.75
					Openness (Self)	M	51	3.65	0.57
						F	111	3.34	0.74

Conclusions

The results show that there is a positive relationship between attractiveness and extroversion attribution. The greater the attractiveness, the higher one would rate the target in extroversion. In addition, the higher the rater's level of conscientiousness, the more likely s/he would rate the attractive targets higher on extroversion and the unattractive targets lower on extroversion. We attempt to conclude that attractive people tend to be viewed as more extroverted. Also there was a positive relationship between the rater's extroversion and the attribution of extroversion. The higher the rater's own extroversion, the higher s/he would rate the attractive targets' extroversion. We attempt to conclude that individuals attribute similar levels of extroversion to attractive targets, ideally wanting to increase the similarity between attractive targets and oneself. Individuals view attractive targets similar to, or like oneself. A limitation of this study is that the results may only be generalized to this particular age group and culture.

Future Directions

This study explored the relationship between the "Big Five" personality characteristics of the participant and the attribution of extroversion to a target according to attractiveness. Further research should be aimed toward exploring the relationship between the "Big Five" personality characteristics of the participant and the attribution of all five personality characteristics to a target. Perhaps we will see more correlations between particular personality traits of the participant and various personality traits attributed to targets. We hope to understand these relations more thoroughly.

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