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Giving Beautiful People an Unwarranted Break: Physical Attractiveness and Perceptions of Crime Severity

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Abstract. The halo effect is the phenomenon that occurs when an overall evaluation of a person affects evaluations of individual traits. One research trend on this effect relates it to physical attractiveness. Using the theory of the halo effect and drawing from research on the effect of attractiveness of defendants on mock jury verdicts, this experiment sought to discover if attractiveness of a suspect affects how severe people perceive his crime to be. In this experiment, college students read a description of a crime and viewed one of three photos with varying attractiveness (i.e., unattractive, average or attractive) of the suspect. The participants then filled out a survey assessing their perceptions of the crime's severity. It was hypothesized that the participants would perceive the crime to be less severe when they viewed the photo of the attractive suspect. The results of this experiment did not show any significant differences in ratings of crime severity between the three levels of attractiveness. This could indicate that the attractiveness stereotype does not extend to less serious crimes or that the photos given to participants were not different enough to produce the effect. If the hypothesis had been supported, this research could have been used to establish less biased jury practices in criminal trials.

People naturally form first impressions of others based on the initial information they gather (Asch, 1946). Asch's research was one of the first on this concept, now known as implicit personality theory, and it is seminal in its principle of impression formation. These naturally formed impressions are put together individually by each person, but there are a few biases and tendencies that are consistently found throughout research on this topic.

One form of bias consistently present throughout the body of research is the halo effect. The halo effect occurs when an overall impression of a person influences evaluations of individual traits or characteristics. Thorndike (1920) coined the term 'halo effect' in his classic study of soldiers in which he asked commanding officers to rate their subordinates on several physical and personality traits. These traits correlated highly with each other trait, indicating that the evaluation of one trait affects the rating of other traits. Thorndike's rating technique was replicated more recently by Lachman and Bass in 2001. The results of this experiment were much the same as Thorndike's original research. The trait ratings of a person deemed to have an unfavorable overall impression were much lower than those of the control stimulus person. In turn, the trait ratings of a person with a favorable overall impression were much higher than those of the control stimulus person.

The theory surrounding the halo effect suggests that an individual requires minimal information to make an overall evaluation or judgment of another person. Nisbett and Wilson (1977) discovered that an instructor, based on a short video introduction and no other information, was viewed much more

positively when the instructor presented themselves with a warm demeanor versus a cold demeanor. When someone is initially confronted with an unfamiliar person, there are certain factors that can weigh more heavily on their first impression. One of these factors is physical appearance. Physical appearance is one of the first characteristics that one sees and assesses when meeting another person, which thereby contributes to an overall impression.

Research surrounding the halo effect instigates a deeper investigation into how the specific aspect of physical appearance affects overall evaluation. This research delves into how physical attractiveness affects impressions. The attractiveness stereotype, as demonstrated by Miller (1970), shows that attractive people are generally assigned more positive traits. As stated previously, physical appearance is often one of the first characteristics that someone notices and evaluates regarding another person. Thus, it is subsequently used to make various judgments and impressions, whether these judgments are based on actual experiences with the person or not.

This notion has been the subject of a great deal of past research. Landy and Sigall (1974) showed that male participants judged an essay to be of higher quality when the picture of the purported author was of an attractive woman than when it was of an unattractive woman. Additionally, a teacher's evaluation of a child's intelligence, social and scholastic aptitude, and how well they would do in school in the future was ~~found to be~~ largely influenced by the child's level of attractiveness (Clifford & Walster, 1973).

One particularly interesting aspect of research on the physical attractiveness stereotype looks at the strength of the effect. Lucker, Beane, and Helmreich (1981) found that the effect of physical attractiveness on trait evaluation was not as strong as previously thought. However, three traits, especially when associated with women, were strongly related to physical attractiveness: sexual attraction, likability, and perceived masculinity or femininity. The results of this research provided evidence that physical attractiveness and traits typically associated with social desirability are highly related to one another. This could indicate that more attractive individuals, especially women, are judged more positively in social situations. For example, attractive women could be judged to have very high femininity and likability by peers without the peers actually having any experience with them. This could be damaging to society in that unattractive people are naturally at a disadvantage when others form impressions about them.

It is clear from previous research that attractiveness has an effect on judgments, but just how far do those evaluations go? Are attractive people naturally judged to be innately good while unattractive people are naturally judged as lesser? According to the groundbreaking research conducted by Dion, Berscheid, and Walster (1972), attractive people were judged to have more socially desirable traits and to be more successful in the future; this research thus coined the "what is beautiful is good" stereotype.

Related to both the general attractiveness stereotype as well as the "what is beautiful is good" stereotype, Griffin and Langlois (2006) conducted research regarding the directionality of the attractiveness stereotype. The results demonstrated that an unattractive woman used as a stimulus was attributed more negative traits than the medium attractiveness level women or the high attractiveness level woman. This furthers the research on this stereotype by indicating that it is possible that "ugly is bad" may be a stronger stereotype than "beauty is good."

With the idea in mind that people who are attractive are generally looked at in a more positive light, it would make sense that this stereotype could apply to actions and behaviors. Dion (1972) demonstrated this effect with children; transgressions

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supposedly committed by an attractive child were judged less negatively than if the transgressions were committed by an unattractive child. A similar experiment had comparable results with the addition that participants assigned less punishment for transgressions to the attractive child than to the unattractive child (Sharma, 1987).

One limitation of this research is that the evaluation of transgressions and punishment of children may seem inconsequential to participants. This could lead them to give more positive or lenient responses to attractive children. However, this effect has also been shown in cases of criminal mock jury experiments. Castellow, Wuensch, and Moore (1990) performed an experiment in which they manipulated the attractiveness of a plaintiff and the attractiveness of a defendant to see which combinations earned more guilty votes in the case of a sexual harassment charge. The results of this experiment showed that the combination of the attractive plaintiff and the unattractive defendant earned the highest percentage of guilty votes, whereas the attractive defendant and unattractive plaintiff earned the lowest. A similar experiment demonstrated that mock jurors, especially females, were more certain of their guilty verdicts when the plaintiff was attractive than when he or she was unattractive (Wuensch & Moore, 2004). These results suggest a distressing notion about our justice system; juries are not capable of impartiality regardless of their personal experiences. People placed onto a jury could make judgments not based on fact, rather based on their impressions of the plaintiff and the defendant, without even knowing they had done so. These impressions have been shown to be influenced by the attractiveness stereotype, no matter how unbiased a jury may appear. The "beauty is good" stereotype benefits attractive people, and not much else can be done to stamp out the implicit personality trait of forming impressions based on the stereotype.

An experiment conducted by Patry (2008) examined the relationship between implicit personality theory, the attractiveness stereotype, and mock jury deliberation. Results of this experiment showed that mock jurors who did not participate in deliberation were more likely to find the less attractive defendant guilty than the attractive defendant. The notion that those participants who did not deliberate with others were more likely to judge the defendant based on the attractiveness stereotype demonstrates that the effect occurs on an individual basis. This means that the effect is not a group notion, and it impacts each of us independently of others.

Much prior research has been done surrounding the halo effect and the physical attractiveness stereotype. Additionally, the research clearly demonstrates that verdicts of mock jury participants are influenced by both of these effects. However, little of this research looks into how the perceived severity of the crime is affected by physical attractiveness. The purpose of the present experiment was to determine if physical attractiveness of a suspect affects how severe a crime is perceived to be by the participants. It was hypothesized that participants would judge a crime to be less severe when it was purportedly committed by an attractive suspect than when it was committed by an unattractive suspect.

Method

Design

This experiment used a between-subjects single-factor design with attractiveness level as the independent variable and perception of crime severity as

the dependent variable. There were three conditions: a third of the participants were shown a picture of an attractive man, a third were shown a picture of an unattractive man, and a third were shown a picture of a man with an average level of attractiveness. The participants were assigned to one of the conditions through random assignment when they arrived in the laboratory.

Participants

Each of the three conditions in the experiment had 17 participants. One condition had 18 participants; however, one participant in that condition did not answer the crime severity question. Their data were only used in the demographics and for the question regarding guilt that will be discussed in the results. Participants were selected using a convenience sample. The experiment was posted on a research board in the psychology department at Minnesota State University Moorhead (MSUM) and students had the option to volunteer to participate. Participants were compensated with course credit for their undergraduate psychology courses. The mean age of the participants was 21 years old (*SD*=5.45), and they were predominantly female (83%). The participants were mostly college juniors and seniors (68%).

Materials

The materials used in this experiment were a crime description, three photographs, and two surveys. The description of the crime that was given to participants was written by the experimenter and is featured below.

> The suspect is an employee at Martin's department store. He was seen putting large boxes of inventory into his car one night after finishing his shift. The co-worker who saw this reported the possible theft to management and clearly identified him. Management went through the security camera footage and indeed saw the suspect carrying 2 large boxes from the stock room, through the store and out into the parking lot. He was questioned about the boxes, and denied knowing anything about it. The store talked to the police, who obtained a search warrant and search the suspect's residence. The police were able to recover the missing merchandise, and the suspect is being charged with theft, the unlawful taking of property from a person or business.

The three photographs featured three different male faces: one unattractive, one average and one attractive. The men in the photos had similar characteristics: brown hair, blue eyes, pale complexion and a thin build. The photos were chosen based on the attractiveness rating and the number of raters. All of the photos used had been rated by more than 80 raters. They were selected from the Chicago Face Database, which supplies a collection of pictures of faces as well as norming data about those faces, such as attractiveness (Ma, Correll, & Wittenbrink, 2015).

The first survey was a demographic survey measuring age, gender, and class in school. The participants were asked to provide their age in a blank given and mark their gender out of four options: male, female, other, or prefer not to answer. They were also asked what class they were in college out of four options: freshman, sophomore, junior, or senior.

The second survey given to the participants measured perceptions of crime severity and it was written by the experimenter. This survey featured ten Likert-scale questions. The participants were asked to indicate the degree to which they agree with statements based on the following scale: *strongly disagree, disagree, undecided/neutral, agree, and strongly agree.* "I feel that this crime is punishable by law" and "I think that this crime warrants time in jail" are examples of statements that participants were shown on the survey. Additionally, there was one rating question that stated, "On a scale of 1 to 10, how severe

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would you rate this crime, with 1 being least severe and 10 being most severe". Lastly, the participants were asked to rate how attractive they thought the person in the photo was on a scale from 1 to 5, with higher ratings indicating higher attractiveness.

Procedure

As each participant entered the experimental laboratory, they were asked to fill out an informed consent form. The informed consent form featured details about the experiment and what that entails for the participant but excluded information that attractiveness of the photos has been manipulated, to ensure that the results of the experiment will not be skewed based on that information. After filling out the informed consent form, each participant was given the demographic survey to fill out. Initially, each participant was randomly assigned to a condition (attractive, average, or unattractive photo). Near the end of the experiment, the participants' assignments were counterbalanced to ensure equal numbers among each condition. Every participant, regardless of condition, was then given a one-page written description of a crime that had supposedly occurred and a photo (different dependent on condition) of the alleged perpetrator. The participant was then asked to read the description and view the photo. After being given a couple of minutes to read the scenario and study the photo, the participants were presented with the crime severity survey. Finally, each participant was given a debriefing form that explains the attractiveness element of the experiment that had been concealed in the initial informed consent form. They were also given contact information for any further questions about the research.

Results

The hypothesis of this experiment was that participants would perceive the crime to be less severe when it was committed by a supposedly attractive suspect than when it was committed by an unattractive suspect. Results of a one-way ANOVA (see Figure 1) showed no significant differences between crime severity ratings among any of the attractiveness conditions, $F(2, 48) = 2.35$, $p > 0.05$. In other words, results did not show an overall effect of physical attractiveness of a suspect on ratings of crime severity. Interestingly, the participants who saw the suspect of an average level of attractiveness ($M = 4.44$, $SD = 1.15$) rated the crime as slightly less severe than the participants who saw the highly attractive suspect ($M = 5.60$, $SD = 1.66$), and the participants who saw the suspect who was unattractive ($M = 5.33$, $SD = 1.78$), $p > 0.05$.

Participants were also asked to rate how much they agree that the suspect is guilty on a five-point Likert Scale. Another one-way ANOVA was performed to see if there were differences in agreement about the suspect's guilt depending on the attractiveness of the suspect. These results (see Figure 1) also showed no significant differences between guilt ratings among attractiveness level, $F(2, 48) = 0.98$, $p > 0.05$. These results indicate that the participant overwhelmingly thought the suspect was guilty of the alleged crime whether they viewed the unattractive suspect ($M = 4.39$, $SD = 0.70$), the average suspect ($M = 4.70$, $SD = 0.59$), or the attractive suspect ($M = 4.58$, $SD = 0.51$).

The last question on the crime perceptions survey asked participants to rate the suspect's attractiveness on a five-point scale in order to confirm that the pre-rated photos from the Chicago Face Database were seen as their intended level of attractiveness (Ma, Correll & Wittenbrink, 2015). Participants who viewed the attractive suspect

(M = 3.59, SD = 1.12) did rate him as more attractive than the participants who viewed the average suspect (M = 2.65, SD = 1.06) and the participants who viewed the unattractive suspect (M = 2.11, SD = 0.68), $F(2, 49) = 10.41$, $p < 0.05$. However, participants who viewed the average suspect did not rate the suspect significantly more or less attractive than the participants who viewed the unattractive suspect. These results indicate that the chosen picture for the attractive suspect did create its intended effect of appearing attractive to the participants, but the chosen pictures for the unattractive and average suspects were not significantly different.

Discussion

Previous research on the theory of the halo effect demonstrates that an overall impression of a person can impact evaluations of that person's individual personality traits (Thorndike, 1920). This theory brought about more research that looked into the physical attractiveness stereotype. In 1970, Miller illustrated this stereotype by showing that attractive people are usually attributed more positive characteristics. The attractiveness stereotype has also been demonstrated in mock jury experiments, which indicate that attractiveness level of both plaintiff and defendant make a difference when determining verdicts (Castellow, Wuensch, & Moore, 1990). The current study sought to further the research on the attractiveness stereotype and mock jury experiments by manipulating attractiveness to see its effects on perceptions of crime severity.

This experiment's specific hypothesis was that participants would judge a crime to be less severe when it was committed by an attractive suspect than when it was committed by an unattractive suspect. This hypothesis was not supported by the current experiment. These results mean that participants did not rate the crime as more or less severe depending on the attractiveness level of the suspect. If the hypothesis had been supported, this research could have had major implications for the justice system as a whole. Had an attractive person's crime been rated less severely than that of an unattractive person's, it would serve as a good indication that an attractive person may fare better in a jury trial. Research with these results could provide the basis for improving jury trial procedures. One such improvement could be implementing a blind jury system. For example, it could become standard for all juries to be placed behind a black curtain; this would eliminate any bias based on attractiveness, race, and gender, because the jury would not be able to see any of the people involved in the case. This would be beneficial for all parties involved in the trial, because it would allow for more fair judgments from juries.

Also, had the hypothesis been supported, this study would have extended the body of research supporting the "what is beautiful is good" stereotype originally purported by Dion, Berscheid, and Walster in 1972. This stereotype indicates that attractive people are viewed more positively than unattractive people. If this experiment had shown that a crime was rated as less severe when it was believed to have been committed by an attractive suspect, this would have certainly lent support for this stereotype. However, because the actual results failed to support the hypothesis, there are other implications to explore.

One possible implication of the actual results is that the attractiveness stereotype may have a limit. Because the crime description used in this research depicted a theft in which the stolen merchandise was returned, it is plausible that this crime was not perceived as serious enough to affected by the attractiveness stereotype. This could also mean that the attractiveness stereotype does not have an effect if the suspect is seen as clearly guilty. This leads into one of the major limitations of this research: the crime

description. The results showed that the majority of participants agreed that the suspect was guilty. After looking at these findings and re-evaluating the crime description, it is possible that the description too clearly implicates the suspect as the perpetrator of the crime. It is probable that participants felt the case involving this crime and suspect was open and closed. It is also possible that the participants thought that the crime was too inconsequential because most rated the crime around average on the severity scale (between four and six on a scale from one to ten). This could have happened because of a number of different details in the crime description. For example, participants could have considered it a relatively unimportant crime because it affected a company and not any other individuals. Participants may have also felt it was unimportant because all of the stolen merchandise was recovered and returned to the store.

An additional limitation of this experiment was that the photos chosen may not have been seen by participants as their intended attractiveness. As stated in the results section, the attractive suspect was rated significantly more attractive than the other two suspects. However, the average and the unattractive photos were not rated as significantly different. This could have had a major effect on the results obtained. If participants did not see the suspect photos as different enough levels of attractiveness, that would account for the similar ratings of crime severity across conditions. The photos chosen were rated as a two, three and four, respectively, on an attractiveness scale of one to five (with five as most attractive) through the Chicago Faces Database (Ma, Correll & Wittenbrink, 2015). Perhaps if the photos chosen had been rated as a one, three and five, respectively, the results would have supported the hypothesis as past research would suggest.

Lastly, another limitation of this experiment was that the participants were recruited via a convenience sample. Because a convenience sample is not completely random, the participants were largely female, around the age of 21 and were all college students. This means that any results obtained from this experiment may not be generalizable to the population. Also, the lack of a representative sample could have been partially responsible for the lack of results. Because most participants were similar demographically, it is possible that many had similar opinions regarding the crime's severity. This similarity of opinion could have produced the grouping of ratings around the middle of the crime severity scale.

Limitations aside, this experiment also had several methodological strengths. Firstly, because of the simplicity of the study, it could easily be replicated. A future replication of this study with a larger and more diverse pool of participants could possibly obtain the hypothesized results. The simplicity of the method would have allowed for a strong causal inference to be made about crime severity dependent on attractiveness had significant results been obtained. Because each condition involved doing an identical task (the only variable changed was the picture), many extraneous variables were eliminated. For example, all participants were in the laboratory for about the same amount of time, approximately five to ten minutes, thus eliminating any fatigue effects that would come from doing a task for a long period of time.

There are many possibilities for future research on the topic of crime severity and physical attractiveness. One such possibility would be to change this experiment into a within-subjects design; a researcher could compile a packet of five or so crime descriptions and suspect photos of varying

attractiveness. The researcher would then have each participant rate the whole packet, testing to see if the participant rated crimes of similar severity differently depending on the attractiveness of the suspect.

Another future direction could be to apply this method in a mock jury setting. Past research strongly shows the effect of the attractiveness stereotype in mock jury settings; for instance, Stewart's 1980 study that found that the more attractive the defendant was, the less severe the less severe of sentence he received from the mock jury. Thus, changing this experiment to have a mock jury element would make significant results more likely to arise. It could be done as follows: the participants would be given a description of the trial of a crime including evidence, prosecution and defense statements and a picture of the suspect. They would then be given a short survey asking to rate severity and possibly a few other variables. It is possible that if participants are given additional information about the crime, they may feel differently about the suspect and his or her respective crime, which could in turn produce results more consistent with the previous research.

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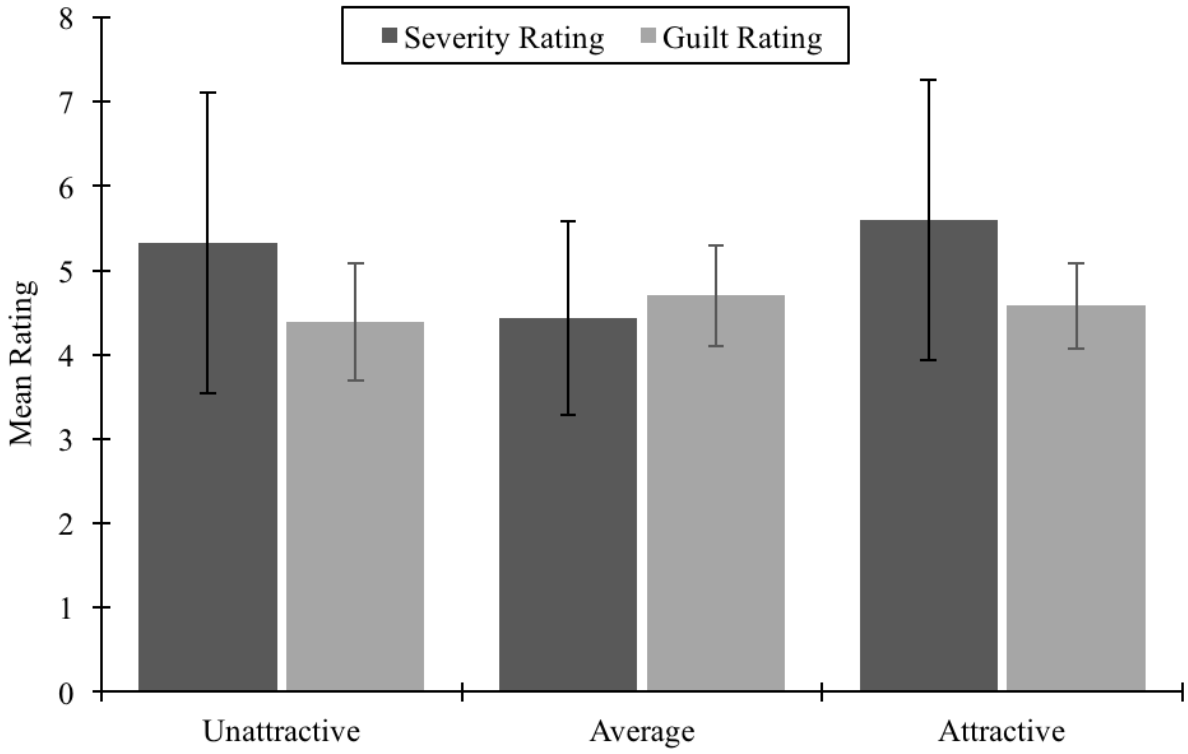

Figure 1. Graph of mean perceived crime severity and guilt ratings across three levels of suspect attractiveness.