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Physical Attractiveness— A Source of Teacher Bias?

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INTRODUCTION

A person's physical appearance is his personal characteristic most obvious and most accessible to others in social interaction. Despite some social psychologists apparent disinterest in investigating physical attractiveness as an antecedent of liking (Aronson, 1969) there has been a developing body of research which suggests that physical attractiveness *is* an important social cue used by others as a basis for social evaluation.

A number of studies, e.g. Brislin and Lewis (1968), Kleck and Rubenstein (1974) and Walsten, Aronson, Abrahams and Rottman (1966) have found that, within the normal ranges of physical appearance, highly attractive young adults are better liked and more preferred as dating partners than are their less physically attractive peers.

Dion, Berscheid and Walster (1972) report a study that goes a step further. Not only were physically attractive persons assumed to possess more socially desirable personalities than those of lesser attractiveness, it was also presumed that their lives would be happier and more successful. Their results suggested that a physical attractiveness stereotype exists with a content compatible with a "what is beautiful is good" thesis.

There is also evidence of the existence of a physical attractiveness stereotype among children. Dion and Berscheid (1971) found that a preschooler's level of physical attractiveness, as judged by adults, bears a relationship to the extent to which he is popular with his peers and to which he is perceived to exhibit certain types of behaviour in interactions with them. Dion (1973) found that preschoolers have consistent stereotypes associated with appearance; both boys and girls preferring pictures of attractive peers as potential friends and rejecting unattractive children. Kleck, Richardson and Ronald (1974) report a study which provides data suggesting that for a group of 9-14 year old boys high sociometric status measured subsequent to two weeks of intense social interaction and also judged on the basis of photographs alone was associated with physical attractiveness. Langlois and Stephan (1977) found preschool and fourth grade children to prefer attractive children and to perceive them as being smarter and friendlier and to show less antisocial behaviours.

Adults and Children

If, as there appears, there is a physical attractiveness stereotype, it seems plausible to suggest that a child's personal characteristics may influence the way in which an adult evaluates his behaviour.

Dion (1972) suggests that people may interpret an individual's actions consistent with their expectations about his personal dispositions. Consequently, it could be argued that if adults believe children differing in physical attractiveness typically display different personal characteristics this may affect their evaluation of attractive versus

unattractive children. In fact, Dion found in the study that the physical attractiveness of a child who commits a transgression (interpersonal physical aggression towards another child and impersonal physical aggression towards an animal) did influence adults' evaluations. Attributional influences were affected both by the severity of a transgression and the attractiveness of the child who committed the offence. Children's physical attractiveness also tended to influence judgements of the undesirability of the transgression, regardless of whether it was mild or severe.

A Source of Teacher Bias?

There have been several studies that have looked at this issue as it might affect the classroom situation. These studies suggest that teachers may hold differential expectations for attractive and unattractive children.

Kehle (1973), in looking at the influence of a number of factors on teacher's expectations for students personality and academic performance, found that physical attractiveness was a factor in teacher ratings of fifth grade students. Clifford and Walster (1973) gave teachers objective information, presumably about a child's scholastic and social potential, accompanied by a photograph of an attractive or unattractive boy or girl. It was found that the child's attractiveness was significantly associated with the teacher's expectations about how intelligent the child was, how interested in education his parents were, how far he was likely to progress in school, and how popular he would be with his peers. Ross and Salvia (1975) attached photographs of attractive and unattractive children to identical fictitious case studies of mildly handicapped children. Experienced teachers indicated that the unattractive children would have more difficulty academically and socially and favoured special class placement more for the unattractive than for the attractive.

While the above studies indicate the possibility of biasing effects in hypothetical investigations of teachers attitudes, Salvia, Algozzine and Sheare (1977) made a study of the relationships between rated attractiveness and two measures of school performance. A study of report cards and achievement test scores indicated that the children who had been rated as attractive by an independent group actually received significantly higher grades on their report cards and, to some degree, higher achievement test scores, than did those rated as unattractive.

Adams and Cohen (1974), whilst suggesting that their results be cautiously interpreted due to "procedure problems", demonstrated that facial attractiveness was a significant factor in differential student-teacher interactions. Algozzine (1978) in a study investigating further the interactions between teachers and children perceived to be attractive or unattractive by those teachers, recorded positive, negative and neutral interactions prior to obtaining the teachers' ratings of attractiveness. The results supported the hypothesis that teacher-perceived attractive children would receive more positive interactions from their teachers.

Some Comments

It has been pointed out (Richardson, 1969) that although physical cues may determine social outcomes during the initial phases of interaction, such cues should decrease in importance as behavioural information is generated during face to face interaction. This possibly suggests some difficulties in interpreting those studies based on teacher reactions to written information and photographs.

It is also probable that those studies which suggest a link between differential attractiveness and differential interaction patterns require further refinement to determine the effects of factors such as social class, student personality characteristics, health etc.

Nevertheless there is a great deal of subjective judgement in educational decisions and there is some evidence developing to suggest that unattractive children may be at a disadvantage simply because they are unattractive.

If this is so it is hoped that teachers will want to make certain that a child's physical features do not operate as an unwarranted impediment to his school progress.

It is suggested that more research is required to tease out the extent to which physical attractiveness may be a source of teacher bias. Nevertheless it is believed that making teachers aware of this possible source of differential response is a first step in preventing its occurrence.

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