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Beautiful People Convey Personality Traits Better During First Impressions

A new University of British Columbia study has found that people identify the personality traits of people, who are physically attractive more accurately than others during short encounters.

The study, published in the December edition of Psychological Science, suggests people pay closer attention to people they find attractive, and is the latest scientific evidence of the advantages of perceived beauty. Previous research has shown that individuals tend to find attractive people more intelligent, friendly and competent than others.

The goal of the study was to determine, whether a person's attractiveness impacts others' ability to discern their personality traits, says Prof. Jeremy Biesanz, UBC Dept. of Psychology, who Co-authored the study with PhD student Lauren Human and undergraduate student Genevieve Lorenzo.

For the study, researchers placed more than 75 male and female participants into groups of five to 11 people for three-minute, one-on-one conversations. After each interaction, study participants rated partners on physical attractiveness and five major personality traits: openness, conscientiousness, extraversion, agreeableness and neuroticism. Each person also rated their own personality.

Researchers were able to determine the accuracy of people's perceptions by comparing participants' ratings of others' personality traits with how individuals rated their own traits, says Biesanz, adding that steps were taken to control for the positive bias that can occur in self-reporting.

Despite an overall positive bias towards people they found attractive (as expected from previous research), study participants identified the "relative ordering" of personality traits of attractive participants more accurately than others, researchers found.

"If people think Jane is beautiful, and she is very organized

and somewhat generous, people will see her as more organized and generous than she actually is," says Biesanz. "Despite this bias, our study shows that people will also correctly discern the relative ordering of Jane's personality traits -- that she is more organized than generous -- better than others they find less attractive."

The researchers say this is because people are motivated to pay closer attention to beautiful people for many reasons, including curiosity, romantic interest or a desire for friendship or social status. "Not only do we judge books by their covers, we read the ones with beautiful covers much closer than others," says Biesanz, noting the study focused on first impressions of personality in social situations, like cocktail parties.

Although participants largely agreed on group members' attractiveness, the study reaffirms that beauty is in the eye of the beholder. Participants were best at identifying the personalities of people they found attractive, regardless of whether others found them attractive.

According to Biesanz, scientists spent considerable efforts a half-century ago seeking to determine what types of people perceive personality best, to largely mixed results. With this study, the team chose to investigate this longstanding question from another direction, he says, focusing not on who judges personality best, but rather whether some people's personalities are better perceived.

G. L. Lorenzo, J. C. Biesanz, L. J. Human. What Is Beautiful Is Good and More Accurately Understood: Physical Attractiveness and Accuracy in First Impressions of Personality. Psychological Science, 2010; 21 (12): 1777 DOI: 10.1177/0956797610388048