# Effects of Race of Attractiveness Ratings and Individuals Physical Attractiveness Stereotypes

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# EFFECTS OF RACE ON ATTRACTIVENESS RATINGS AND INDIVIDUAL'S PHYSICAL ATTRACTIVENESS STEREOTYPE

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The purpose of this research project was to investigate the "physical attractiveness stereotype". Previous research suggests that the physical attractiveness plays an important role in how we ascribe certain personality traits. Weiten (2002) for example, noted the stereotype as people's tendency "to ascribe socially desirable personality traits to individuals who are considered to be more attractive, seeing them as more sociable, poised, and well adjusted than those who are less attractive". However, very little research has been conducted to explore the role race may have on the concept. The current study was conducted to explore the validity of the physical attractiveness stereotype and determine how influential the role of race may be. In this study, twelve subjects were given a series of cards, each with four pictures on them, and were asked to match certain personality traits (some positive and some negative) to the pictures that were presented on the cards. The pictures on the cards actually represented people of different race and varying attractiveness. Data was then collected and analyzed to determine if race can in fact influence the physical attractiveness stereotype.

Physical Attractiveness Stereotype

For years now, the physical attractiveness stereotype has been sparking interest and questions about human behavior. The physical attractiveness stereotype has been described as the tendency for people "to ascribe socially desirable personality traits to those who are good looking, seeing them as more sociable, poised, and well adjusted than those who are less attractive"(Weiten, 2002). Dion, Berschied, and Walster (1972) found that physical attractiveness stereotypes do exist. In their study they found that attractive individuals were judged more socially desirable than unattractive individuals. Marital competence and occupational status were also both influenced by attractiveness, where the attractive individuals faired better. Based on these findings, it may be possible to conclude that physically attractive individuals may have an advantage over those less attractive.

Many researchers investigating the physical attractiveness stereotype have come to the conclusion that people often believe "what is beautiful is good" (Dion, Berschied, and Walster, 1972). Many of the basic findings conclude that individuals who possess attractive facial characteristics are found to be more favorable than those with lesser attractiveness. Physical attractiveness would thus have great impact on initial impressions (Eagly, Ashmore, Makhijani, & Longo's 1991 meta-analytic review of research on the physical attractiveness stereotype). Some other factors that are influenced by the physical attractiveness stereotype include a professor's perception of how intelligent he or she views students within his or her class (Ritts, Patterson, & Tubbs, 1992). The latter finding can directly apply to a college population, making the stereotype quite influential.

Not all findings coincide with the stereotype. For example, in Larose, Tracy & McKelvie's (1993) study, the stereotype was found only to be present in the female population examined. This suggests that the stereotype may possibly vary based on gender. This also appears to be relevant when examining the stereotype across different cultures. People in different cultures perceive beauty and attractiveness in different ways, and these differences may influence the stereotype. Wheel & Kim (1997) provided evidence for this with their research examining the stereotype within different collectivistic cultures. Their findings stated that the "content of the stereotype varies with cultural values." Consequently, cultural values and beliefs often are more important than the stereotype itself, especially when attractiveness is not emphasized on physical aspects. Similarly Chen, Shaffer, & Wu's (1997) found that the stereotype in Taiwanese culture plays an important role in selection and decision making, but only along the lines of what the culture deemed to be important in terms of cultural beliefs and values.

But can the physical attractiveness stereotype be influenced by race? Based on previous research, race alone can influence whether one of an ethnic background may or may not get a call back for a job (Perina, 2003). Research conducted by Perina examined race discrimination in the job application process. This was done by submitting resumes with names that would either be presumed ethnic or Caucasian (with same job qualifications), and examining how many callbacks each received. Perina found that those with Caucasian names received significantly more callbacks than those with ethnic sounding names. Even though much research has investigated the physical attractiveness stereotype, race has rarely been investigated as a factor that could influence the stereotype.

The present study aimed to determine if students at MSU were influenced by physical attractiveness, and if race influenced or altered our perception of the physical attractiveness stereotype. From the research examined, it was hypothesized that the stereotype would be present, and that race may be able to influence the stereotype possibly providing evidence of a racial preference in terms of attractiveness.

Method

*Participants*

The 18 participants in this study consisted of Caucasian college students aged 18-28 years.  Of the 18 participants 12 were female and 6 were male.  Because of the small sample of male participants only female data was analyzed.  Of the female participants the mean age was 20.42 years.  Students received extra credit for their participation.

*Procedure*

Participants were told that the purpose of the experiment was to examine how well one can draw conclusions about someone's personality with only minimal visual cues provided prior to the start of the study.  Each participant was given a consent form, a rating sheet (for data collection), and a stack of 15 cards.  The rating sheet was used to collect demographic information such as age, gender, and ethnicity as well as the participant's personality ratings.  No traceable information (i.e. name, social security number, Tech ID.) was collected.  Each of the 15 cards consisted of 4 bust images (i.e. head and shoulders) of people of different racial backgrounds and of varying levels of attractiveness.  Male participants viewed cards containing only female images, and females viewed cards containing only male images.  Images were selected from a high school yearbook based on ratings of attractiveness from ten independent males and females prior to the study.  They were rated on a scale of 1-20 as to how attractive they were perceived by members of the opposite sex.  Sixty images were then selected for each

gender on the basis of attractiveness ratings and race. Thirteen of the chosen 60 images were African American, the rest were Caucasian. The images were arranged on the cards in different combinations of attractiveness and race. As the participants viewed the cards they were asked to complete the information on the data collection sheet. The data collection sheet consisted of 15 sets of 4 personality traits (each set corresponding to a card) in which the subject would assign a picture number (1-4 depending on picture placement on the card) to a personality trait. Each set of 4 personality traits had 3 positive personality traits and 1 negative personality trait. After all the information had been completed and collected, the subjects were then debriefed concerning the real purpose of the study. The initial results collected from the data indicate no significant effect for race influencing the physical attractiveness stereotype (ns, p>.05). Data was then analyzed to determine if the physical attractiveness stereotype was present at all.

## Results

The results were obtained by running a 2 level repeated measures ANOVA with an alpha level of .05, using SPSS running on a PC with Windows XP. Only female participants data was analyzed (N=12) due to a lack of male participation. The data was collected by the analysis of 2 high and low attractiveness variables labeled PICLEVEL. The high level consisted of 4 cards in which African Americans represented the highest level or tied for the highest level of attractiveness (there was one picture of an African American on each of these cards and the other three pictures were of Caucasians) and vice versa for the low level. When analyzing the data, both levels (high and low) for each of the 4 cards were assigned a number based on which race (African American or Caucasian) was ascribed to the negative personality trait (the number 1 was assigned if

the race was Caucasian and 2 if the race was African American). Each level was then analyzed for each of the 12 participants to determine the mean score, which was then averaged. There was a significant effect on the physical attractiveness stereotype, $F(1,11)=7.33$, $p<.05$. However, no significant differences were seen due to race (ns, $p>.05$).

## Discussion

Levels of attractiveness appear to play a significant role in how we attribute certain characteristics to certain people. More attractive individuals are more likely to be ascribed with positive characteristics; whereas less attractive individuals are more likely to be ascribed with negative ones. However, no differences were seen when race was included. This may suggest that, at least with women, race is less important than attractiveness level. If enough male participants participated, it could be predicted that the results would have been similar to the female sample.

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