The Role of Self-Worth in the Perception of Others

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Abstract

Contrary to the widely accepted theory that beauty is good, current research has suggested that attractive people may be at a disadvantage when rated by someone of the same sex. The goal of the current study was to test the hypothesis that the bases upon which individuals stake their self-worth might play a role in these effects. Forty-seven college-aged students participated in this study by filling out the contingencies of self-worth scale (Crocker, Luhtanen, Cooper, & Bouvrette, 2003) in order to assess the bases of their self-worth. Participants were then asked to look at a series of photographs and rate the likelihood that male and female subjects, of varying attractiveness, possessed certain positive or negative traits. As predicted, females whose self-worth depended largely on their physical appearance tended to rate attractive female targets less positively, whereas, male subjects, regardless of the bases of their self-worth, did not display this bias against attractive same-sex targets.

Past studies have shown that people attribute more socially desirable personality traits to attractive individuals than they do to those they consider unattractive. This can be seen in the Dion, Berscheid, and Walster (1972) study entitled “What is Beautiful is Good.” This study found that attractive targets were assumed to possess more socially desirable personality traits, such as sociability, interpersonal warmth, and kindness, when compared with unattractive targets (Dion et al., 1972). Also, attractive targets were assumed to have “better prospects for happy social and personal lives” (Dion et al., 1972). Due to this perceived ‘beauty is good’ stereotype, “participants also indicated more interest in bonding with consensually attractive targets relative to unattractive targets” (Lemay, Clark, & Greenberg, 2010, p.343). In general, individuals were interested in associating with attractive targets, whether opposite sex or same-sex, because they perceived the attractive individual to possess certain attributes that would facilitate a good relationship (e.g., warmth and kindness).

Calling these findings into question, however, current research has started to uncover the hidden disadvantages of being beautiful. A study conducted by Agthe, Sporrlle, and Maner (2010) found that attractive candidates were at a disadvantage when evaluated by individuals of the same sex. For instance, female evaluators rated attractive female candidates less positively and were less likely to offer them the job than those they rated as unattractive (Agthe et al., 2010). A similar effect was also observed among the male participants, as they rated attractive males less favorably than unattractive male candidates (Agthe et al., 2010). However, this bias did not make males less likely to offer the position to the attractive male candidates (Agthe et al., 2010). Contradicting the findings of the ‘beauty is good’
research, “the bias against highly attractive same-sex persons may reflect perceptions of threat in the context of social relationships” (Agthe et al., 2010, p.1154). Thus, these findings suggest that not all individuals may desire social interactions with beautiful people of the same gender. In fact, the beauty of same-sex peers might threaten some individuals. This is consistent with findings that “highly attractive participants showed no evidence of organizational discrimination against attractive same-sex targets” (Agthe et al., 2010, p.1154). In fact, “discrimination was observed only among relatively less attractive participants” (Agthe et al., 2010, p.1154). This means that attractive targets were rated more positively by attractive same-sex evaluators, and rated less positively by unattractive evaluators. Researchers believe that unattractive raters viewed highly attractive same-sex targets as a threat, whereas attractive raters were less likely to be threatened by a candidate’s attractiveness (Agthe et al., 2010). In general, Agthe et al. (2010) found that attractive individuals tend to be at a disadvantage in organizational settings, when assessed by members of the same sex. Organizational discrimination is also more likely when the candidate is more attractive than a same-sex rater.

Another study conducted by Buunk, Massar, and Dijkstra (2007) evaluated the evolutionary drives that facilitate intra-sex competition. The researchers believed that “jealousy should not be viewed as a basic or specific emotion, but rather as an evaluative-motivational complex aimed at assessing the threat that a rival may impose to one’s reproductive interests” (Buunk et al., 2007, p.214). When examining mate selection from an evolutionary perspective, Buunk et al. (2007) stated that “men, more than women, value physical attractiveness in a partner, supposedly because this signals women’s reproductive value” (p. 214). As a result, the researchers assumed that “women will have evolved a tendency to compete with other females in this domain, and jealousy in women is likely to be driven particularly by a rival’s physical attractiveness” (Buunk et al., 2007, p.214). On the other hand, “females, more than males, value dominance and status in a mate, supposedly because these features are related to a man’s ability to provide protection and resources” for future offspring (Buunk et al., 2007, p.214). Due to the evolutionary importance placed on males to be more dominant, the researchers assumed that “jealousy in human males is likely to be influenced...by the rival’s dominance and status” (Buunk et al., 2007, p.214).

To examine what characteristics would evoke jealousy, researchers asked participants to imagine that someone was flirting with their significant other (boyfriend or girlfriend), and then to describe what characteristics of that ‘rival’ would make them most jealous (Buunk et al., 2007). Consistent with their expectations, Buunk et al. (2007) found that “women more often than men mentioned [that] a rival’s sexy appearance...would make them jealous” (p.215). In contrast, “men experienced more jealousy than women when their rival was more socially or physically dominant or had a higher status than themselves” (Buunk et al., 2007, p.215). In general, men are more threatened by other males’ social or physical dominance, the traits most desired by female mates. On the other hand, females tended to feel more threatened by attractive females, because their mates desire physical attractiveness.

Although research has provided an evolutionary backdrop to better understand what causes intra-sex jealousy and competition, it has not closely
examined the self-worth of the evaluators themselves and how this might influence their ratings of others. The aim of the present study, therefore, was to examine how raters’ self-worth affects their attitudes toward attractive same-sex others. It was predicted that heterosexual females whose self-worth largely depends on physical appearance would be more likely to feel threatened and form negative first impressions of attractive females. Conversely, it was predicted that males, regardless of their self-worth, would not feel threatened and attribute negative characteristics to attractive males.

**Method**

Forty-nine undergraduate students from the University of California, Davis, 35 females and 14 males, participated in this experiment. Their ages ranged from 19 to 25, with more than half of them being either 20 or 21 years old. Also, a majority of participants were Caucasian (n=24) and Asian (n=14), with a small proportion being Native Hawaiian or Latino/Latina. As for sexual orientation, all but two participants reported being heterosexual or straight. Because this study was designed to examine heterosexual individuals, the data from the two homosexual participants were omitted, leaving a final sample of 47 subjects (34 females and 13 males).

To begin the study, participants answered five appearance-related questions that were taken from the contingencies of self-worth scale (Crocker, Luhtanen, Cooper, & Bouvrette, 2003). This scale measures the importance of certain characteristics, such as physical appearance, in the rater’s self-esteem (Crocker et al., 2003). For example, subjects were asked to answer questions such as, “when I think I look attractive, I feel good about myself” (Crocker et al., 2003, p. 899). For each question, responses were collected using a 7-point Likert scale (Crocker et al., 2003).

Following the questionnaire, participants were then asked to imagine they were going to attend a party that coming weekend and were about to view some photos of the other guests. For each photo, participants were asked to rate how likely it was that each photographed individual possessed certain personality traits. These traits included three negative qualities (arrogant, rude, conceited) and three positive qualities (friendly, humble, trustworthy). Participants rated their responses on a 5-point scale, from 1 (very unlikely) to 5 (very likely). Then participants were asked if they would be interested in having a conversation with each target at the party. Subjects responded by circling “yes”, “no”, or “maybe” for each photo. A ‘no’ response was given the score of “0”, ‘maybe’ a score of “1”, and a ‘yes’ response a score of “2.”

This conversation variable was added to assess whether participants’ ratings were accurately reflecting their true feelings about the targets’ personality. For example, if subjects rated the personality traits of the photographed individual positively, then it would be assumed they’d be willing to talk with the photographed person at the party. However, it would be contradictory if participants rated the photos positively but then reported being uninterested in talking with the target.

To determine whether personality ratings varied depending on the attractiveness of the photo, we included attractive, average, and unattractive faces in the survey. In order to assess the subjective attractiveness of each photo, we had a separate sample of 20 undergraduate students rate eight male and female
yearbook photos of varying levels of attractiveness. Each photo was rated using a 5-point scale, with a score of “1” being considered very unattractive and a score of “5” being considered very attractive. The final six photos were chosen because the twenty students rated the photos as either being unattractive, average, or attractive. For instance, the final three male photos chosen to be in the study were rated as follows: unattractive (M = 1.79), average (M = 3.25), and attractive (M = 4.05). The final three female photos chosen to be in the study also represented statistically unattractive (M = 2.05), average (M = 2.95), and attractive (M = 4.05) faces.

**Results**

**Personality.** In our analysis, there was a marginally significant 4-way interaction on the personality variable between the sex of the subject, his or her ratings on the CSW scale, the attractiveness of the target, and the sex of the target (F(2, 80) = 2.59, p = .08; see Figure 1). Females who scored high on the contingencies of self-worth scale tended to view the personalities of the neutral (M = 2.83) and attractive females (M = 2.85) less positively than the personalities of the neutral (M = 3.38) and attractive males (M = 3.58). This supports the hypothesis that females who base their self-worth on physical appearance are more likely to form critical first impressions of attractive females. And because attractive males do not pose a threat to them, high CSW females are less likely to form negative first impressions of attractive males. This makes sense when you think about attracting mates. As Buunk et. al (2007) suggested, females are more threatened by other attractive females because they pose a risk to their reproductive survival. If there is a more attractive female in the room, then another female’s chance of obtaining the attention of the attractive male is lessened. As a result, high CSW females tend to be warier of attractive females because they consider these individuals to be their competition. This assessment of threat between females can also be seen as high CSW females tended to view the personality of the unattractive female (M=3.96) more positively than the neutral or attractive same-sex target. It can be assumed that high CSW females rated the unattractive same-sex target’s personality more positively because they did not view this unattractive target as a threat to their reproductive options. This is because high CSW females probably figured that the unattractive female target was less likely to obtain attention from attractive males, and thus they posed less of a threat.
Figure 1. Ratings of the male and female targets as a function of participant sex, target attractiveness, and contingencies of self-worth on the personality variable.
As for the males who scored high on the CSW scale, the tendency to attribute negative characteristics to attractive same-sex targets was not as prominent. This confirms my assumption that males would not be as threatened by other attractive males. As stated in the study by Buunk et al. (2007), men are more threatened by the status and power of other males, traits with no direct correlation to physical attractiveness. Therefore, it is not surprising that males in my study were not as threatened by other males’ attractiveness.

**Conversation.** All subjects were also asked how likely they were to engage in conversation with the target individual at a party. For this conversation variable, there was a significant 4-way interaction between sex of the subject, CSW ratings of the subject, the sex of the target, and the physical attractiveness of the target \( F(2, 86) = 5.24, p = .007; \) see Figure 2). The male and female subjects who scored high on the contingencies of self-worth (CSW) scale tended to be more interested in talking with better-looking opposite-sex targets. For instance, the high CSW males tended to be more interested in talking with a neutral female \( (M = 1.56) \) than with an unattractive female \( (M = .78) \). Similarly, high CSW females were more interested in talking with an attractive male \( (M = 1.55) \) than with an unattractive male \( (M = .25) \). However, this same preference to talk with attractive opposite-sex targets was not shared by the low CSW subjects. This means that male and female subjects who did not base their self-worth on physical appearance were more open-minded in talking with various targets, regardless of the targets’ gender or physical attractiveness. Therefore, it can be concluded that people who base their self-worth on physical appearance tend to discriminate in their willingness to talk with opposite-sex targets. Hence, high CSW females wanted to talk more with attractive males, and high CSW males wanted to talk more with average or attractive females.
Figure 2. Ratings of the male and female targets as a function of participant sex, target attractiveness, and contingencies of self-worth on the conversation variable.

As for evaluating same-sex targets, high CSW females were not as interested in talking with the female targets, regardless of the targets’ physical appearance. For instance, high CSW females typically indicated their interest in having a
conversation with any of the female targets with a “maybe” response ($M = .8$), whereas low CSW females tended to have more interest in talking with any of the females target with an average mean of 1.48. The results did not show the same effect for high or low CSW males. In sum, the conversation variable showed that high CSW females were not as interested as low CSW females in talking with other attractive females. However, the male subjects, regardless of their CSW ratings, tended to discriminate less in talking to attractive same-sex targets.

**Discussion**

Overall the results of this study found that females who base their self-worth on their physical appearance (high CSW) tend to project less positive traits onto neutral or attractive looking females. High CSW females also tended to rate neutral or attractive males more positively. However, these effects were not found when male subjects rated male targets. This study also found that high CSW males and females were more discriminating in choosing people of the opposite sex with whom they wanted to talk. For instance, the males and females whose physical appearance was important to their self-worth (high CSW) reported being more interested in talking with attractive opposite-sex targets. However, this same preference to talk with attractive opposite-sex targets was not shared by the low CSW subjects. As for evaluating same-sex targets, high CSW females were less interested in talking with any of the female targets compared with low CSW females. This means that females whose physical appearance was not important to their self-worth were more willing to talk with female targets than females whose physical appearance was important to their self-worth.

From a broader perspective, this study offers new insight into evaluators who negatively rate attractive same-sex others. Unlike prior research, this study measured the connection between physical appearance, its importance to the evaluators’ self-worth, and their ratings of attractive same-sex others. By testing for this variable, our research shifted the focus from the target to the evaluator. While past research has found that attractive individuals can be at a disadvantage when rated by individuals of their own sex, the current research identifies one internal characteristic of the evaluator that might cause him or her to project negative perceptions onto attractive targets.

Our research suggests, in fact, that females who base their self-worth on physical appearance may be particularly prone to avoiding the potential threat that members of their same gender can pose. As a result, high CSW females might be reluctant to befriend attractive same-sex others because they are more likely to project negative characteristics onto the attractive other. This unconscious projection might also hinder attractive females from being accepted into certain social or organizational settings where high CSW females have authority to accept or reject other females (e.g., in hiring decisions). It is likely that high CSW females will feel threatened by the attractiveness of a same-sex other and not want her in the group. Especially if there are attractive male members, high CSW females may feel insecure and want to avoid sharing male attention with more attractive females.

This study has some very important limitations. First of all, the sample size for this study was relatively small. It is difficult to generalize results to the larger population when a sample size consists of only forty-seven subjects. Moreover, it
can be difficult to gather accurate ratings from individuals who are uncomfortable admitting negative attitudes about a target. For instance, many subjects told me that they were uncomfortable rating people negatively, since they were not a “judgmental person.” Some even apologized that they were unable to be harsh about judging others, but that it was “not in their nature to judge a book by its cover.”

Such comments point to two very important implications for why my results about personality ratings came back as marginally significant. For one, subjects quickly realized that the study involved negative or positive perceptions of targets’ personality qualities. Even though they might not have realized the study was related to judgments about beauty, they were consciously aware they were being indirectly asked to judge targets’ personalities. Some participants’ unwillingness to appear rude led them to simply not rate specific targets on the personality questionnaire or answer with a string of “3”s, a ‘neutral’ score. Therefore, if participants did not correctly fill out the survey or were unwilling to report honest opinions, their data were omitted.

Another major limitation of this study is that the six photographed individuals used in the survey were of varying ethnic backgrounds, including Asian, African American, and Caucasian. This might have produced biased results as some subjects’ could have stereotyped beliefs about certain races. For instance, it is not uncommon to see blonde, white females portrayed in our mass media as ditzy, self-absorbed individuals. For this reason, some participants might have rated the blonde, white female more negatively based on her hair and skin color, rather than on her overall physical attractiveness. In addition, some people are more attracted to certain races over others, which could bias the results. Just as certain males might be more attracted to women of a particular race, certain females might be more threatened by attractive females within certain racial groups. It is possible, for instance, that females might be more jealous of an attractive female who is a member of the racial group that their ideal mates prefer.

These limitations provide useful insight into how future research can benefit and expand upon the current study. First of all, a greater number of participants would allow researchers to better generalize findings to the entire population. Also, improved study design might be able to better mask the purpose of the study from participants. Researchers could do this by adding a better scenario into the beginning of the study to limit the participants’ discomfort with judging targets. Moreover, future research could also make all targets one race and test the perceptions of specific races against these photos. In general, it would be interesting to see if there was a correlation between the race of the rater and the race of the target. In addition, future researchers could also test to see whether the negative bias toward attractive same-sex others would still be true if participants were married rather than single, as in this study. It would be fascinating to see whether intra-sex competition exists to the same degree when test subjects are in committed relationships.

Despite these limitations, the current study provides useful ways for researchers to conduct future studies into the factors that influence raters’ perceptions of others’ attractiveness.
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References