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Personal Traits Attribution by Children and Adults

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Abstract

We examined the effect of stimuli and observer's age to the correlation between attractiveness and estimations of kindness, openness, strength, courage and intelligence made by Russian preschoolers (5 year old), school pupils (9-10 years) and University students (19-24 years). We used color photos of four age groups: newborns, 7-year-olds, 20-year-olds and elder people (>65 years). The analysis confirmed the significant positive correlations between attractiveness and the majority of traits' ratings. The hypothesis about weakening of the correlation between attractiveness ratings and believes about personal traits with observers age has not been confirmed.

Keywords: Face perception; personal traits; attribution; attractiveness; halo-effect; development.

1. Introduction

The tendency to attribute more favorable traits to more attractive people has been studied by psychologists for less than 40 years, though "what is beautiful is good" stereotype is four thousand years old.

In spite of constant proclamations of the irrelevance of the exterior by philosophers and writers, the bright histories of Cyrano de Bergerac and Quasimodo are exceptions to the main rule – good characters of novels and plays are mainly the most beautiful, and the negative characters have a repulsive or in extreme cases even horrific appearance [1], [2].

Images of the Nutcracker and the Beast from early childhood have been a reminder of the possibility of a combination of ugly appearance and noble heart. However, when in the final of the tales these heroes receive a beautiful human body, it is perceived on the one hand as a natural reward for "good behavior" and on the other hand, as a restoration of previously disturbed harmony.

Nowadays the vitality of the stereotype of "what is beautiful is good" has been confirmed in the experimental studies of Dion et al. [3] and others.

Many researches demonstrated that people tend to ascribe positive qualities to attractive people and negative

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qualities to unattractive.

A lot of studies have been conducted in which, on the basis of photographs of beautiful or less attractive people, the observers were to make some conclusions about the hypothetical individuals. The main results of these studies, which are summarized in articles of Eagley et al. [4] and Feingold [5], confirmed the link between the attractiveness of humans' faces and the attributing a number of positive characteristics to them. Physically attractive people are perceived as more successful, sociable and smart. They get higher marks for dominance and sexuality, self-appraisal and mental health. Symmetry as a component of facial attractiveness is related to successful cognitive aging [6].

Thus, to date, a number of interesting facts concerning the role of attractiveness in social interaction have been studied. However, most of them are about specific facts concerning the limited sample of the observers (mainly students). The problem of halo-effect is still unstudied in terms of the developmental psychology despite the extremely high social significance of this particular aspect of the topic.

The importance of the research theme is underscored by the fact that different attitude to attractive and unattractive people in a meaningful way affects our behavior towards them, that does impact our parenting and social interaction in the broadest sense.

The effect of beauty stereotype becomes apparent very early. J. Langlois et al. [7] demonstrated discrimination and visual preference for attractive faces even by 12-month-old infants who played significantly longer with the attractive doll and interacted more positively with a stranger who wore a professionally constructed attractive or unattractive mask. Seven-to-nine-year-old children evaluate attractive faces as more sociable, altruistic and intelligent as was shown by Griffin & Langlois [8]. Unfortunately, we cannot compare the results of all these studies, as the experimental designs are different.

The aim of our study was to examine the link between attractiveness and personal trait attribution in a wide range of experimental situations, i.e. for the observers and stimuli faces of different age and sex groups.

2. Method

2.1. Participants

Children and adults of three age groups took part in our investigation.
Group 1 – 30 preschoolers 4,6 – 5,5 years (mean age – 5,2, median – 5), 14 girls and 16 boys.
Group 2 – 17 school pupils 9,0 – 10,7 years (mean age – 10,01, median – 10).
Group 3 – 40 university students 19,0 – 24,0 years (mean age – 21,7, median -21), 20 young women and 20 young men.
All the participants, as well as the children's parents gave their consent to participate in the study.

2.2. Stimuli

Stimulus material consisted of 32 color photos of people of four age groups (newborns, 7-year-olds, 20-year-olds and elder people (65 – 82 years) made in standard view (head turned right at ¾) and standard size 10*15 cm. All photos except the images of newborns were processed in Photoshop CS5.1 in order to camouflage hairstyle, makeup and clothing.

In each age set, we had two attractive and two unattractive photos of each sex. Attractiveness of face stimuli was rated in our previous experiments [9]. Photos with the highest and lowest scores in all age groups were chosen for this study.

2.3. Procedure

2.3.1. Study 1

The aim of Study1 was to detect the possible links between the ratings of attractiveness and personal traits attributed to the stimuli faces and then to compare the results of the participants of three age groups.

Each participant received a set of randomly arranged photos so he/she could see only one image at a time. The task was to rate sex, attractiveness, health, strength, intelligence, kindness, altruism, honesty, openness and courage of a person shown at a photo by five-level Likert scale. The experimenter recorded all the ratings in the protocol. Then the photo was turned face down and the participant began to work with the next image. Experimenter has talked to preschoolers and school pupils about all the named personal traits to be sure that the children understood the meanings of the words. We did not used the term "altruism" for 5-year-olds changing it to "kindness". For 9 - 10 year-olds we used both terms as synonyms.

(We did not suggest to rate the personal traits by the images of newborns, but some observers did it themselves. They explained these results as the assumptions about the future of the infants. We will not discuss these data here, as they require further analysis.)

Correlations between attractiveness of faces and personal traits and health ratings were studied. Spearman r rank correlation was used.

2.3.2. Study 2

The aim of Study 2 was to explore and compare the content of the representations of the other person for preschool and primary school children and the university students.

In our preliminary study [10] we asked 13 "experts" (men and women, age 18-45) to name the most and the least attractive traits of girls, boys, women and men. In spite of the fact that the list of most frequently named qualities was short enough it was different for children and for adults as well as for males and females.

To supplement these results we asked our participants to describe the persons from the stimuli photos and an attractive person. We got free narratives (text's length was not limited). Then we used the content analysis of texts.

3. Results

The results of *Study 1* confirmed the significant correlations between attractiveness and the majority of traits for our observers (fig. 1). All communications have a positive sign.
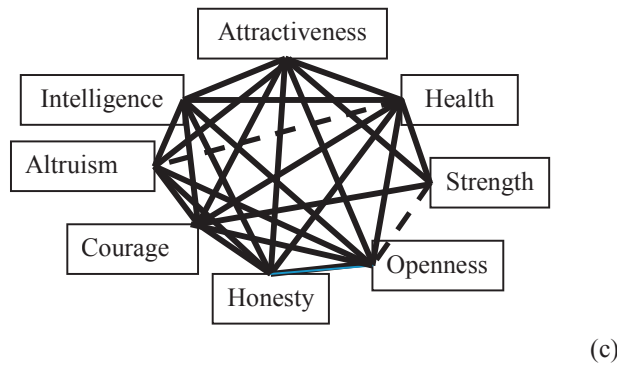

(a)   (b)

(c)
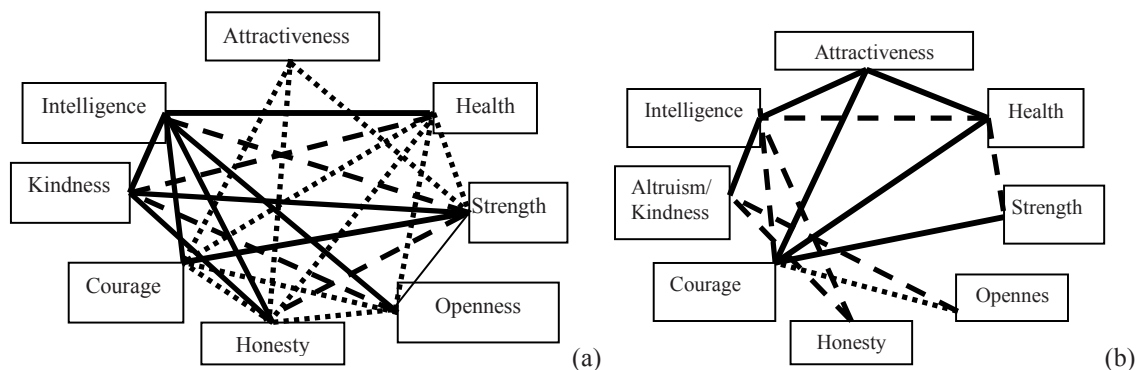
Fig.1. Correlations between the ratings of attractiveness, personal traits and health of their peers for 5-year-olds (a), 9 - 10 year-olds (b) and 20-year-olds (c): solid black lines – p<0,00001, dashed lines – p<0,0001, dotted lines – p<0,001.

Intelligence and kindness are the most important traits for preschoolers. All other characteristics are associated with them. The ratings of attractiveness of faces are the lowest in the group of 5-year-olds. We explain this as a result of non-ecological view of faces with concealed hair. For observers of groups 2 and 3 it is easier to accept the stimuli as some sort of "the rules of the game".

For primary school pupils number of interconnections significantly falls down. The role of intelligence and kindness is still high. However, attractiveness and courage become important too. Now we can distinguish two factors – external (attractiveness, health, strength and courage) and internal (attractiveness, intelligence, kindness and honesty).

For university students we can see the structure of correlations closely related to each other. Attractiveness is a central component of this structure.

Study 2 demonstrated that the content of representations of the other person is different for the children and the adults (fig. 2).
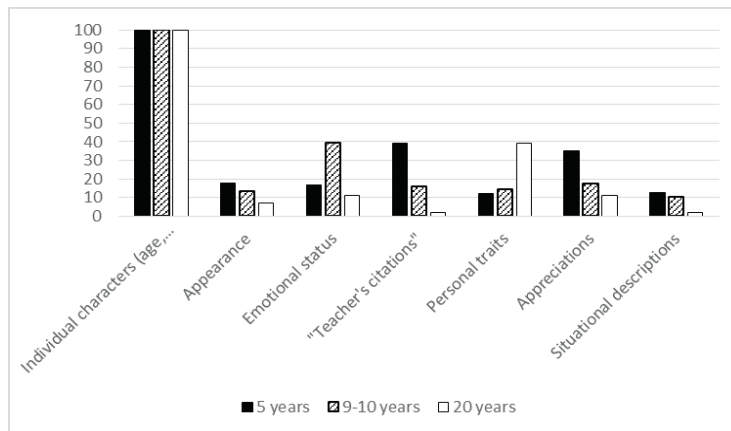

Fig. 2. The percentage of the participants in each of three age groups who named the characteristics of different types when describing an attractive person.

Nearly all the descriptions of a person by the participants of all age groups begin from the words "this is a girl", or "this is an old man" indicating the individual characteristics.

Number of indications to a person's appearance ("with big eyes", "bad skin", or "funny nose"), appreciations ("such a good boy"), situational descriptions ("looks like my schoolmate, probably likes music too") and "teacher's citations" ("a clever boy who always behaves well") decreases with the age of the observers, while the attention to personal traits increases.

4. Discussion

Similar to the results of Griffin and Langlois [8] with pupils and young adults estimating the women's faces, our experiment confirmed that for our observers "what is beautiful is good" stereotype works for male and female stimuli faces.

The results indicate the beginning of differentiation of the previously undivided image of a stranger for 9-10 year-olds. For preschoolers - their peers are totally good or bad. When we asked primary school pupils to describe the children presented by our photos, the majority of characteristics named were associated with intelligence ("smart", "knows a lot", "loves to read", "a good student") and behavior ("well-behaved", "sometimes fights"). Apparently, at the conscious level, for schoolchildren their contemporary is not a holistic person with some personal qualities, but mainly a student, and is assessed only by the school performance criteria and behavior, we often heard the direct citations of teachers' words. The same inconsistency of stranger's image for young pupils has been shown in the work of N. Babitch [11] on first impression formation.

For the older group of the observers - image integration of another is completed, the man is simpler: if he is good, he is good in everything. Representations stereotyping achieves its maximum at this age (~20 years).

Only an individual personal development and accumulation of experience can reduce the rigidity of stereotypes and enable young men and women to see the world in all its complexity. Further study of adult and elder population representations will give us an opportunity to see whether this really occurs.

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