

PHYSICAL ATTRACTION

SLIDE ONE

What makes someone attractive and why? How does attraction relate to relationship initiation? We will answer these types of questions in this topic.

This lecture was developed in collaboration with a former student of mine, Stephanie Moody.

SLIDE TWO

Attraction is an attitude of 'liking' for someone. When we like them we rate them positively across many other characteristics. So what makes someone attractive?

SLIDE THREE

Facial symmetry is one factor used to evaluate physical attractiveness. This is basically a measure of how symmetrical your facial features are with one another. The picture on this slide illustrates how a computer program calculates the distance between facial features such as the eyes. The more symmetrical, the more attractive.

SLIDE FOUR

The photograph here demonstrates how you can take the same face and alter the symmetry and make it more attractive. Facial symmetry is believed to be a sign of physical health. There are many childhood diseases and illnesses that impact our body's development such that they can make our features less symmetrical over time. So the more symmetrical your face, the greater health you may have.

SLIDE FIVE

Another explanation as for why symmetry is important is that it is a sign of fertility for women. The photo here is of the same woman during the fertile time of her menstrual cycle versus her non-fertile time. Which is the most attractive to you?

Research has found that soft tissues change over the course of the ovulatory cycle for women with breast tissues, ears and even fingers being thirty percent more symmetrical at ovulation than on the first day of a woman's cycle.

Most men in the study using the photograph above rated picture A as the most attractive and this was when the woman was most fertile.

So even subtle changes in body tissue can affect how attractive people are rated because of the symmetry.

SLIDE SIX

Another explanation that has been offered for why we like symmetrical faces is that when we take a bunch of photographs of people and average them together they look more symmetrical. Therefore the symmetrical face reflects an average of the faces that we know and so it feels familiar to us.

When things appear familiar, we like them more and the liking leads to attraction.

SLIDE SEVEN

The shape of a face is also used to determine attractiveness and for men there basically two types that are rated as attractive. A face with a strong chin and broad forehead such as George Clooney or Colin Farrell is attractive, as are faces with smaller chins and rounder faces such as Leonardo DiCaprio and Justin Bieber. Interestingly, heterosexual women rate these different types of faces as more attractive at different stages of their ovulation cycle with the stronger chin high foreheads being more attractive around ovulation.

SLIDE EIGHT

There are also two types of faces that are considered attractive for women. One is a mature face with prominent cheekbones, eyebrows and smile, much like Julia Roberts or Angelina Jolie. Another is a smaller face with delicate features such as Halle Berry or Meg Ryan.

SLIDE NINE

For men broad shoulders and lean waists are considered most attractive and is something that many formal suit designers like Armani accentuate in their cuts. The waist to hip ratio is also important. For men, the ideal is 0.90 with the waist being only slightly smaller than the hips. For women, a frontal .70 waist to hip ratio is most appealing. This is your typical hourglass figure and explains why the corset has become a popular piece of women's clothing for centuries. There is great variability in body types and sizes across cultures. However this is still the preferred ratio for women.

SLIDE TEN

When shown pictures of women with different body shapes where the ratio was altered, men preferred the 0.70 waist to hip ratio for women as seen in the figure here. Interestingly, many women assume that men would prefer a slimmer figure but this is not typically the case.

Why?

Waist to hip ratios are a sign of physical health. In fact numerous studies have found that this 0.70 waist to hip ratio for women is a better predictor of health than body mass index.

For example, women with this ratio are less susceptible to diabetes, cardiovascular disorders and ovarian cancer. Men with waist to hip ratios around 0.90 have less prostate and testicular cancer.

There is a link in the course that will allow you to calculate your own waist to hip ratio. The waist to hip ratio for men and women is also a sign of fertility. For example, women within the 0.70 range have optimal levels of estrogen and higher rates of pregnancy.

SLIDE ELEVEN

The color red has been associated with increased attractiveness for younger women. Why? Researchers have recently discovered that this preference exists because men perceive red as indicating greater sexual receptivity in

women. These results are consistent with evolutionary perspectives and research indicating that female primates display red on their bodies to indicate sexual receptivity.

SLIDE TWELVE

Physical characteristics are not all that impacts our attraction for others. Personality traits also play an important role. For example, someone could be very physically attractive but mean and so we like them less and will find them less attractive overall.

There are two basic clusters of traits that influence attractiveness: warmth and competence. These both create feelings of affection and respect which could increase attraction.

SLIDE THIRTEEN

Physical attractiveness can impact how we view personality as well. For example, there is a stereotype found across cultures that when someone is beautiful they are good. So whatever is socially valued in a culture is attributed to attractive people.

In the US, being attractive is typically associated with being intelligent, socially skilled and popular. Being unattractive is associated with negative personality traits much like the contrast between Cinderella and her ugly step sisters.

SLIDE FOURTEEN

We also like people who are similar to us both physically and in terms of our personality traits. There are a few theories to explain this.

Balance theory proposes that when we share similar traits or beliefs as another person, we are in balance with them and this makes us more attracted to them.

SLIDE FIFTEEN

Social comparison theory proposes that we like other people who are similar to us because they confirm what we believe. For example, if I like a certain politician and my friends do too this makes me feel that I am right because other people agree with me. This agreement through our comparisons with others makes us feel good and that feeling makes us like the other person more.

SLIDE SIXTEEN

Although we may find certain people more attractive than others we tend to match up and meet with people who are similar to our level of attractiveness. This is called the matching hypothesis.

This also explains why many people react negatively when they see people who do not match up on a number of characteristics such as age or attractiveness. Many assume that one partner must trade something like money to get the other more attractive partner.

SLIDE SEVENTEEN

Can smell impact our attraction towards others? Yes. When we like a smell such as a nice perfume or scent it creates positive feelings which increase our liking and ultimately attractiveness. There have been several studies conducted where they had men and women wear t-shirts for several days without bathing or even wearing scented perfumes. They then had heterosexual members of the opposite sex smell the t-shirts and rate how much they liked the smells. Men rated women's shirts that were worn around ovulation as the most attractive as that is when she is most fertile. Women rated the shirts of men with similar genetic markers but slightly different major histocompatibility complex which is part of our immune system so the sweat that they smelled on these shirts were signs that they were a good match. Now MHC is important because it gives offspring an advantage in beating back disease organisms. So pheromones do exist and can impact our attraction.

SLIDE EIGHTEEN

There are also environmental factors that increase our liking and ultimately attractiveness to others. A considerable amount of work suggests that proximity is one of the strongest predictors of attraction. When you come in close contact with someone over and over again you develop positive emotions for the other person.

SLIDE NINETEEN

Another important contributor to attraction is the field. In an open field people can come and go as they please. Each encounter is voluntary. Physical attraction and personality play a larger role in attraction in such situations such as at bars or restaurants. Closed fields are where contact with others is not voluntary such as at work or in the classroom. Attraction develops here over time because you in proximity to the other person, you spend a lot of time with them and you find similarities. We also like people more when we believe that we cannot have them or when we are running out of time such as at closing time of a bar or when others do not support dating a particular person.

SLIDE TWENTY

In summary, physical attraction is related to facial symmetry, body type and facial shapes. Colors, smells and personality are also very important in our attraction to others. Similarity in environmental factors such as proximity can also impact how we interact with others and that also ultimately influences our attraction.