Calling Miss Congeniality – Do Attractive People Have Attractive Traits and Values?

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We've all been warned not to "judge a book by its cover," but inevitably we do it anyway. It's difficult to resist the temptation of assuming that a person's outward appearance reflects something meaningful about his or her inner personality.

Indeed, research shows that people tend to perceive attractive adults as more social, successful, and well-adjusted than less attractive adults, a phenomenon that's been termed the "what is beautiful is good" stereotype.

But could that really be true? Are physically attractive people really just as attractive on the inside as they are on the outside?

In a new article published in Psychological Science, a journal of the Association for Psychological Science, Lihi Segal-Caspi and Sonia Roccas of the Open University and Lilach Sagiv of The Hebrew University of Jerusalem investigated whether the "what is beautiful is good" stereotype holds up in the real world.

The researchers examined how *traits*, which describe what people are like, and *values*, which describe what people consider important, might be related to physical attractiveness.

Segal-Caspi and colleagues hypothesized that outside observers would perceive attractive women as more likely to have socially desirable personality traits than less attractive women. Specifically, they hypothesized that observers would judge attractive women to be more agreeable, extraverted, conscientious, open to experiences, and emotionally stable than less attractive women. They hypothesized that no such correlation would be found between women's attractiveness and their perceived values, since judgments about what constitutes a "good" value are likely to vary from observer to observer.

The researchers recruited 118 university students to serve as "targets" or "judges." The targets completed surveys about their values and their traits. They were then videotaped entering a room, walking around a table looking at the camera, reading a weather forecast, and leaving the room. Each judge saw a videotape of a different target, chosen at random, and evaluated the target's values and traits and then her attractiveness, along with other physical attributes.

Women who were rated as attractive were perceived as having more socially desirable personality traits, such as extraversion, openness to experience, and conscientiousness, just as the researchers hypothesized. Out of the ten types of values, however, only one was thought to be associated with attractiveness: Attractive women were perceived as more likely to value achievement than less attractive women.

But when the researchers looked at the targets' actual self-reported traits and values, they found the opposite relationships. Targets' attractiveness, as rated by the judges, was associated with with their self-reported values and not with their personality traits. Women who were rated as attractive were more likely to endorse values focused on conformity and submission to social expectations and self-promotion.

Segal-Caspi and colleagues conclude that although some people may think beauty and goodness go together, the results from this study indicate that beautiful people may tend to focus more on conformity and self-promotion than independence and tolerance.

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