

The Two Faces of Attractiveness

April 23, 2013

The Huffington Post:

Imagine that you're an early human, trying to make your way in a perilous world. One very useful talent would be reading and reacting to the faces of other early humans — rapidly categorizing them into good and safe, on the one hand, or bad and threatening on the other. This skill would come in handy for everything from selecting mates to identifying friends and enemies.

...

This automatic judgment — beauty equals average — is also a powerful cognitive bias, at least as predictable is the cognitive fluency rule. Indeed, according to psychological scientist Jamin Halberstadt, there is not a single study that has failed to show this effect. So how do humans reconcile these competing impulses in making decisions today?

Halberstadt, of the University of Otago in New Zealand, working with colleagues in the US and the Netherlands, has been trying to sort out this cognitive paradox. Why would average faces — more ambiguous, less identifiable faces — be more appealing? One possibility, he thought, is that average faces are more attractive in a large, universal sense, but less attractive at the local level. That is, if we know a unique face from personal experience, then that deviation from the norm is more appealing, because of its familiarity, than a prototype human face. He decided to test this idea with morphed faces.

Read the whole story: [The Huffington Post](#)

Wray Herbert is an author and award-winning journalist who writes two popular blogs for APS, [We're Only Human](#) and [Full Frontal Psychology](#).