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Perceptions of Plagiarisers: The Influence of Target Physical Attractiveness, Transgression
Severity, and Sex on Attributions of Guilt and Punishment

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Abstract

The attractiveness-leniency effect (ALE) suggests that physically attractive targets are less likely to be perceived as guilty compared to less attractive targets. Here, we tested the ALE in relation to attributions of students who have committed plagiarism. British adults ($N = 165$) were shown one of eight vignette-photograph pairings varying in target sex (female/male), physical attractiveness (high/low), and transgression severity (serious/minor), and provided attributions of guilt and severity of punishment. Analyses of variance revealed significant interactions between attractiveness and transgression severity for both dependent measures. Attractive targets were perceived as guiltier and deserving of more severe punishments in the serious transgression condition, but there was no significant difference between attractive and less attractive targets in the minor transgression condition. These results are discussed in terms of a reverse attribution bias, in which attractive individuals are judged more negatively when they fail to live up to higher standards of conduct.

Keywords: Attractiveness bias; Attractiveness-leniency effect; Physical attractiveness; Plagiarism

Introduction

In their classic study, Dion, Berscheid, and Walster (1972) demonstrated that physically attractive individuals tend to be perceived more positively (e.g., more positive personality traits, lead better lives) than less attractive individuals. This led Dion et al. (1972, p. 285) to suggest that, in people's perceptions of other, "what is beautiful is good." This effect has since come to be known as the *attractiveness bias* and is supported through meta-analytic findings (Feingold, 1992; Langlois et al., 2000), which indicate that physically attractive individuals are ascribed a range of positive traits including high trustworthiness and honesty (Patzner, 2006; Swami & Furnham, 2008). Consistent with this perspective, both field (e.g., Downs & Lyons, 1991; Stewart, 1985) and mock-juror studies (for a review, see Mazella & Feingold, 1994) point to an attractiveness-leniency effect, such that physically attractive defendants are less likely to be perceived as guilty compared to less attractiveness defendants, and also receive more lenient sentences or punishments. In addition, one review of the literature has suggested that target sex does not reliably influence the attractiveness-leniency effect (Eagly, Ashmore, Makhijani, & Longo, 1991).

However, other research has suggested that the attractiveness-leniency effect is moderated under certain conditions. For example, the effect has been found to decrease in strength when the crime is seen to be related to physical attractiveness (e.g., swindling; Sigall & Osgrove, 1975; Smith & Hed, 1979) or when jurors are allowed to deliberate on the guilt of a defendant (Patry, 2008). In addition, studies consistently show that the attractiveness-leniency effect is attenuated or even reversed with greater severity of the crime (e.g., Beckham, Spray, & Pietz, 2007; Downs & Lyons, 1991). Some scholars attribute this to a "reverse attribution bias"; that is, when a defendant is physically attractive but is accused of a serious offense, they are perceived as having violated the assumption that what-is-beautiful-is-good. This, in turn, results in an "overcorrection" in attributions that manifests in terms of

more negative judgements and harsher punishment (Abwender & Hough, 2001; Mazella & Feingold, 1994). A related possibility is that attractive persons are also perceived as vain, egotistical, selfish, or feel entitled – what Cash and Janda (1984) termed the “what is beautiful is self-centred bias”.

In the present study, we sought to examine the attractiveness-leniency effect in terms of academic dishonesty (plagiarism). In so doing, we extended the available research to a transgression that has not been previously been the focus of studies, but that has serious consequences for institutions of higher education (Tennant & Duggan, 2008). More specifically, we examined the impact of target sex, physical attractiveness, and transgression severity on perceptions of guilt and punishment decision-making. Based on previous studies (Mazella & Feingold, 1994), we hypothesised that physical attractiveness and transgression severity would interact to influence outcomes, such that an attractiveness-leniency effect would be seen for minor plagiarism but would disappear for serious transgression. Further, based on previous findings (Eagly et al., 1991), we did not expect target sex to interact with either physical attractiveness or transgression severity to shape outcomes.

Method

Participants

Participants were 71 women and 94 men from the United Kingdom (U.K.), who ranged in age from 18 to 60 years ($M = 24.08$, $SD = 7.70$). The majority (74.2%) were of British White ancestry and, in terms of educational qualifications, 61.3% had an undergraduate degree, 19.0% had a postgraduate degree, and the remainder were still in full-time higher education.

Materials

Facial stimuli. The stimuli consisted of four photographic and standardised (equivalent size, head angle, and neutral facial expression) images of faces obtained from the

Chicago Face Database (CFD; Ma, Correll, & Wittenbrink, 2015). From this database, we selected two images of White men (WM-004 and WM-236 in the CFD) and two images of White women (WF-022 and WF-229). Within each sex category, we selected, based on physical attractiveness ratings (1 = *Not at all*, 7 = *Extremely*) provided by Ma et al. (2015, $N = 1,087$), one image to represent the high attractiveness condition (female stimulus $M = 5.09$, male stimulus $M = 4.66$) and one image to represent the low attractiveness condition (female stimulus $M = 2.68$, male stimulus $M = 2.04$).

Vignettes. Participants were presented with a brief vignette describing a case of academic dishonesty, which we designed to be reflective of a typical coursework-based degree programme in the U.K. The vignettes were paired with a photograph that participants were told had been taken from student records. The vignettes varied in terms of the severity of the alleged transgression and in terms of target sex: “This student is studying at a university in the United Kingdom. As part of her/his final year, s/he had to complete a 10,000-word dissertation. This dissertation is worth a quarter of her/his mark in this academic year. S/he submitted the dissertation on time, before the deadline. It is customary practice to run all dissertations through a plagiarism-detection programme. The result showed that 20%/70% of the dissertation had been directly copied off another piece of work.” Following presentation of the vignettes, participants were asked to rate the extent to which they believed targets were guilty of plagiarism on a 7-point scale (1 = *Not at all guilty*, 7 = *Definitely guilty*) and how severe the punishment should be (1 = *Very lenient*, 7 = *Very severe*). The order of presentation of these items was counter-balanced for each participant.

Procedures

Ethics permissions for this study was obtained from the departmental ethics panel at University College London. The second author used an opportunistic recruitment strategy to solicit participation in the study via social networking sites between November 2016 and

January 2017. The study was advertised as a project on plagiarism and was limited to residents of the U.K. of adult age and those who had completed or were currently enrolled on a U.K. higher education degree programme. The latter inclusion criterion was used to ensure that all participants would be minimally familiar with the issue being investigated in the present study. Those who agreed to participate were sent a link to the questionnaire, which was hosted on Qualtrics, and had to confirm that they were completing the study on a desktop computer (rather than tablet or smartphone) to ensure minimal standardisation across participants. All participants provided digital informed consent and were randomly assigned to view one of eight vignettes. The study, therefore, used a between-subjects design, in which participants saw one of eight vignettes paired with a photograph of a purported student who had committed a plagiarism offence as part of an unnamed degree course. Once they had provided vignette-based ratings, participants were asked to provide their basic demographics (sex, age, and ethnicity). The questionnaire took approximately 5 minutes to complete. All participants took part on a voluntary basis and were not remunerated. The questionnaire was anonymous and all participants received debrief information at completion.

Results

We initially ran 2 (target sex: women vs. men) \times 2 (attractiveness: high vs. low) \times 2 (transgression severity: high vs low) \times 2 (participant sex: women vs. men) analyses of variance (ANOVAs), with perceptions of guilt and punishment, respectively, as the dependent variables. However, participant sex never reached significant either as main effects or in interactions (all F s $<$ 2.82, all p s $>$.095); for the sake of parsimony, we report on the 2 \times 2 \times 2 ANOVAs without participant sex. The ANOVA with guilt attributions showed that there was no significant three-way interaction, $F(1, 157) = 1.79, p = .183, \eta_p^2 = .01$, nor were there significant two-way interactions between target sex and attractiveness, $F(1, 157) = 0.16, p = .689, \eta_p^2 < .01$, or between sex and transgression severity, $F(1, 157) = 0.01, p = .913, \eta_p^2$

$< .01$. There was, however, a significant two-way interaction between attractiveness and transgression severity, $F(1, 157) = 10.56, p = .001, \eta_p^2 = .06$. Tests of simple effects showed that, in the low transgression condition, there was no significant difference in attributions of guilt between attractive and less attractive targets, $t(78) = 0.63, p = .529, d = 0.14, CI = -0.97-0.50$. In contrast, in the high transgression condition, attractive targets were rated as significantly more guilty than less attractive targets, $t(83) = 5.29, p < .001, d = 1.16, CI = 0.71-1.55$. There were also significant main effects of transgression severity, $F(1, 157) = 43.87, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .21$, and attractiveness, $F(1, 157) = 4.65, p = .033, \eta_p^2 = .03$, but not of sex, $F(1, 157) = 1.64, p = .202, \eta_p^2 < .01$.

The ANOVA with punishment indicated no significant three-way interaction, $F(1, 157) = 0.01, p = .926, \eta_p^2 < .01$, and no significant two-way interactions between target sex and attractiveness, $F(1, 157) = 0.54, p = .462, \eta_p^2 < .01$, or between sex and transgression severity, $F(1, 157) = 3.67, p = .057, \eta_p^2 = .02$. There was, conversely, a significant two-way interaction between attractiveness and transgression severity, $F(1, 157) = 8.01, p = .005, \eta_p^2 = .05$. In the low transgression condition, there was no significant difference in judgements of punishment between attractive and less attractive targets, $t(78) = 1.98, p = .052, d = 0.44, CI = -1.29-0.01$. On the other hand, in the high transgression condition, attractive targets were judged to require stronger punishment than less attractive targets, $t(83) = 2.09, p = .040, d = 0.45, CI = 0.03-1.21$. There was also a significant main effect of transgression severity, $F(1, 157) = 4.37, p = .038, \eta_p^2 = .01$, but not of attractiveness, $F(1, 157) = 0.01, p = .966, \eta_p^2 < .01$, or of sex, $F(1, 157) = 0.19, p = .662, \eta_p^2 < .01$.

Discussion

As we expected, the results of the present study showed that a target's physical attractiveness and transgression severity interacted to influence participants' attributions of guilt and decisions about punishment for cases of academic dishonesty. In contrast to our

hypothesis, however, we did not find an attractiveness-leniency effect. Instead, we found an opposite effect, where attractive targets were perceived as guiltier and deserving of heavier punishment when they had committed a serious plagiarism transgression, but no significant difference between attractive and less attractive targets when they had committed a minor transgression. Although these findings are broadly consistent with previous studies suggesting that credibility judgements are influenced by facial appearance (e.g., Martelli, Majib, & Pelli, 2005; Porter & ten Brinke, 2009), they are also at odds with the literature on the attractiveness bias and require some consideration.

One possible explanation for our findings is based on the notion of a reverse attribution bias (Abwender & Hough, 2001; Mazella & Feingold, 1994). Mazella and Feingold have suggested that attractive individuals may be held to higher standards of conduct and behaviour, and that they may be judged more negatively when they fail to adhere to those standards. Following from this view, it might be suggested that attractive targets in the present study were judged more negatively in the serious plagiarism condition because they were being held to higher standards than less attractive individuals; to quote Abwender and Hough (2001, p. 610), attractive targets should have “known better.” An alternative possibility is that attractive targets were judged more negatively because participants believed they may have “used” their attractiveness in pursuance of their transgression (e.g., believing that they would be less likely to get caught because they are physically attractive).

However, these possibilities do not explain why the attractiveness-leniency effect was not found in the minor transgression condition, as we expected. It is possible that participants did not view the minor transgression condition as being serious or even a punishable offence. In this case, any effect of target attractiveness may have been perceived as irrelevant or intentionally downplayed. One further aspect of our findings is noteworthy: although we found significant effects for both dependent variables, the effect size in terms of perceived

guilt ($d = 1.16$) was much larger for attractive participants than it was for severity of punishment ($d = 0.45$). Indeed, the effect size in the latter case was comparable to that of the magnitude of the effect for severity of punishment in the minor transgression condition ($d = 0.44$), although this difference did not reach significance. One liberal interpretation of these findings is that, although attractive targets were judged more harshly in terms of guilt, this did not fully translate into decisions about punishment. It is possible that participants were more confident in ascribing attributions of guilt in a zero-order acquaintance context (i.e., where they did not know the targets) than they did in making decisions about punishment (which may have had a real impact on the purported plagiarisers).

Several limitations of the present work should be considered. First, the present study used only a single target stimulus in each condition and we therefore cannot rule out the possibility that the present results were driven by idiosyncratic, stimulus-specific effects. Using a larger set of stimuli within each condition would help to mitigate against this limitation, as would the inclusion of a control condition that does not include the use of target photographs. Future work could also include further conditions, such as the use of smiling (e.g., Abel & Watters, 2005) or target ethnicity (Abwender & Hough, 2001), to examine whether such cues have an effect on perceptions of plagiarisers. A further limitation is that we only used a limited set of dependent measures. Replications of our research would do well to use a wider set of variables, such as perceptions of intentionality in plagiarising (e.g., conscious versus ignorant plagiarising; Colnerud & Rosander, 2009) or meta-perceptions about target motivations for plagiarising. It would also be useful to further vary the seriousness of the plagiarism offence and include a control condition in which no offence took place. In addition, our recruitment methods mean that, although all participants would have been familiar with plagiarism issues (i.e., all participants were in, or had completed, higher education), our findings may not be generalisable to those who adjudicate on

plagiarism cases in U.K. higher education institutions or to other cultural groups. Likewise, it may be important to control for participants' own previous accounts of plagiarism (e.g., self-reported plagiarising and whether they were caught and punished).

These limitations notwithstanding, the findings of the present study suggest that target physical attractiveness may have an effect on perceptions of guilt and judgements of punishment in cases of serious plagiarism. More specifically, our results point to a reverse attribution bias, such that attractive targets are perceived as guiltier than less attractive targets for severe plagiarism, although whether this translates into judgements about punishment severity is debatable. While further research is necessary, our preliminary findings may have implications for procedures and policies in U.K. higher education institutions. For example, to mitigate against unfair outcomes, it may be useful to train practitioners and academic staff to be aware of attractiveness biases and to implement procedures that minimise the impact of student attractiveness on outcomes in cases of plagiarism.

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Table 1. *Means and Standard Deviations (in Brackets) as a Function of Target Physical Attractiveness, Sex, and Transgression Severity.*

Item	Female target				Male target			
	High attractiveness		Low attractiveness		High attractiveness		Low attractiveness	
	(n = 41)		(n = 43)		(n = 42)		(n = 39)	
	Serious	Minor	Serious	Minor	Serious	Minor	Serious	Minor
	plagiarism	plagiarism	plagiarism	plagiarism	plagiarism	plagiarism	plagiarism	plagiarism
	(n = 20)	(n = 21)	(n = 21)	(n = 22)	(n = 21)	(n = 21)	(n = 18)	(n = 21)
Guilt	6.67 (0.99)	4.85 (1.63)	5.72 (0.98)	4.71 (1.64)	6.57 (0.75)	4.24 (1.75)	5.23 (1.45)	4.83 (1.54)
Punishment	4.43 (1.57)	3.75 (1.48)	3.63 (1.21)	4.24 (1.51)	4.76 (1.26)	3.29 (1.41)	4.33 (1.35)	4.06 (1.39)