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Exploiting the beauty in the eye of the beholder: The use of physical attractiveness as a persuasive tactic

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ABSTRACT

It is commonly perceived that women have greater success than men in using their physical attractiveness to persuade members of the opposite-sex to do favors. The current study is the first to empirically test this notion. One hundred and ninety men and women reported their experiences with the use of physical attractiveness as a persuasive tactic between themselves and members of the opposite-sex. Among the results, women reported more frequently having success with the tactic than did men and men reported more frequently having been successfully persuaded by the tactic than did women. Discussion argues that as women age beyond their 20s, they are increasingly less likely to have success with the tactic. Also discussed is how individuals' attempts to reduce cognitive dissonance associated with use of the tactic may affect their reporting and use of it.

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In an episode of the situation-comedy *Seinfeld*, Jerry's attractive girlfriend persuades a male manager at a movie theater to sell them tickets for a movie that is already sold out. She also dissuades a male traffic patrolman from writing a ticket after he stops Jerry for speeding. Similarly, in a recent British reality TV show, simply by being friendly, four attractive young women were able to persuade three young men, whom they had met briefly the day before, to carry out heavy construction work under the sub-tropical sun at the women's villa. The men even assented to the women's requests to refill their drinks as they lay sunbathing beside the pool.

These snippets from popular culture illustrate a notion prevalent in the popular imagination. This is that, without engaging in sexual relations, women more than men are able to successfully use their physical attractiveness to persuade opposite-sex individuals to do favors involving the provision of services or economic resources. Implicit in the notion is that, unlike individuals using their physical attractiveness to secure mates, individuals using their physical attractiveness as a persuasive tactic give the impression that they are sexually attracted to the persuadees when, in fact, they are not attracted to them. Moreover, as the examples indicate, the notion is most closely associated with favors done between individuals who are relative strangers or who do not know each other well.

The notion is further expressed in the archetypal female figures of the "gold digger," who uses her beauty to extract cash or

gifts from men without necessarily engaging in sexual relations, and the "femme fatale," who uses her sexual allure to entice men into compromising situations. It is also illustrated in the beliefs that attractive women have little trouble getting men to give them a ride when they are hitchhiking or help them change a flat tyre. The perception is supported by the prevalence of gentlemen's clubs, in which "exotic dancers" are able to extract substantial sums of money from men without engaging in sexual relations with them.

The use of physical attractiveness as a persuasive tactic may involve enhancing one's appearance through personal grooming and highlighting one's bodily features by wearing tight or revealing clothing (e.g., Tooke & Camire, 1991). Moreover, as it is designed to evoke romantic or sexual interest, it may be considered synonymous with flirting and behaviors such as smiling, touching, and sustaining eye contact (e.g., Moore, 1985). As studies indicate that both men and women value physical attractiveness in a mate (e.g., Hill, 1945; Li, Bailey, Kenrick, & Linsenmeier, 2002), it is expected that both women and men use it as a tactic to persuade opposite-sex individuals.

To the best of our knowledge, the only empirical findings concerning the degree to which men and women use physical attractiveness as a persuasive tactic have been secured from investigations into negotiations between individuals of unequal power or status. For instance, Salter, Grammer, and Rikowski (2005) investigated whether subordinate men and women use different tactics when attempting to obtain concessions from powerful males. Salter et al. found that for female but not male patrons

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attempting to gain access to an exclusive nightclub with male doormen, there was a positive correlation between “sexiness” of dress (measured by tightness of clothing and amount of skin showing) and number of affiliative mannerisms used (including smiling, eye contact, presenting of buttocks and chest, and hair stroking). This led Salter et al. to conclude that female patrons used mannerisms in a qualitatively different way from males, namely as courtship signals to release sexual motivation in men. Moreover, for female but not male patrons, both sexiness of dress and number of affiliative mannerisms used were negatively correlated with level of doorman threat, indicating that the use of courtship signals is an effective tactic for women attempting to appease powerful males.

Because all doormen were male, however, Salter et al.'s (2005) findings do not address whether there are sex differences in tactics used to persuade individuals of the opposite-sex. In addition, the results may be limited by the fact that Salter et al. followed other researchers in investigating the relationship between sex differences in nonverbal behavior and sex differences in perceived dominance. In seminal studies, researchers argued that the nonverbal behavior of men and women is determined by sex differences in the power hierarchy of American society (Henley, 1977; Goffman, 1976). Specifically, these researchers contended that patriarchy has resulted in women typically enacting nonverbal behaviors that are submissive in comparison to those typically enacted by men. Subsequent studies have provided little support for this argument, however. Instead, researchers have found much ambiguity regarding whether behaviors are perceived as submissive, dominant or belonging to some other descriptive category (e.g., Halberstadt & Saitta, 1987; Hall, 2006).

It may not be valid, therefore, to consider the use of physical attractiveness as a persuasive tactic that is specific to individuals between whom there is a differential in power or status. Rather, as it serves to evoke sexual interest, we contend that it should be considered a tactic used specifically by individuals who believe that the individuals whom they wish to persuade perceive them as potential mates.

If individuals use their physical attractiveness to persuade opposite-sex individuals who perceive them as potential mates, then the tactic involves one sex exploiting the other's desire for physical attractiveness in mates. As such, the sex expected to be more susceptible to being exploited by the tactic is the one whose members place greater importance in a potential mate's physical attractiveness. Numerous studies using different methodologies have found that men place greater importance than do women on the physical appearance of mates (e.g., Buss, 1989a; Kenrick, Neuberg, Zierk, & Krones, 1994). In line with this, the mating tactics found to be most frequently used by and effective for women, but not by and for men, include embellishing their physical appearance (Tooke & Camire, 1991).

Moreover, the physical features that men have evolved to be especially attracted to are those possessed by women in their teens and 20s, including skin that is unwrinkled and not sagging, hair that is not gray, pert breasts and buttocks, and a relatively low waist-to-hip ratio (e.g., Singh, 1993; Symons, 1995). This is because before puberty women are infertile and after puberty their fertility rises until peaking in their late 20s. In addition, although women's fertility remains relatively high until their mid-30s, their *reproductive value* or the number of children that they are likely to produce in the future steadily declines after peaking in their late teens (e.g., Symons, 1979).

The forgoing indicates that women are likely to be more successful than men in using their physical attractiveness as a tactic to persuade opposite-sex individuals and women in their teens and 20s are likely to have more success than other women with the tactic. As the women participating in the current study are

all in their teens and 20s, this leads us to derive the following predictions:

Prediction 1: Women will provide a higher mean rating than men regarding the frequency of *successfully* using their physical attractiveness to persuade opposite-sex strangers to do favors.

Prediction 2: Men will provide a higher mean rating than women regarding the frequency of opposite-sex strangers *successfully* using their physical attractiveness to persuade them to do favors.

If women have greater success using physical attractiveness as a persuasive tactic and if successful use of the tactic furthered the reproductive success of ancestral persuaders, then there would have been greater selection pressures on women than on men to use the tactic. This leads to the following predictions:

Prediction 3: Women will provide a higher mean rating than men regarding the frequency of using their physical attractiveness in *attempting* to persuade opposite-sex strangers to do favors.

Prediction 4: Men will provide a higher mean rating than women regarding the frequency of opposite-sex strangers using their physical attractiveness in *attempting* to persuade them to do favors.

If women are more successful than men in using physical attractiveness as a persuasive tactic and if the tactic involves the persuaders not being physically attracted to the persuadees, the following may be predicted:

Prediction 5: Men will provide a higher mean rating than women regarding the frequency of having been persuaded to do favors by opposite-sex strangers using their physical attractiveness, only to later discover that the persuaders were not physically attracted to them.

It follows that the psychology that facilitates individuals using the tactic is expected to have resulted in an evolutionary arms race, for it would have produced selection pressures for the evolution of a psychology that facilitates individuals avoiding being exploited by the tactic. This psychology is expected to motivate persuadees to refuse to continue doing favors for persuaders who have used their physical attractiveness to persuade them to do a favor but who later indicate that they are not physically attracted to the persuadees (e.g., Buss, 1989b). Resentment or anger, for example, would motivate the termination of cooperation. If women are more successful than men in using their physical attractiveness as a persuasive tactic, the following may be predicted:

Prediction 6: Men will provide a higher mean rating than women regarding the frequency of feeling resentment after being persuaded to do favors by opposite-sex strangers using their physical attractiveness and becoming aware that the persuaders were not physically attracted to them.

Prediction 7: Women will provide a higher mean rating than men regarding the frequency of experiencing opposite-sex strangers whom they had persuaded to do favors using their physical attractiveness expressing resentment when the individuals became aware that they were not physically attracted to them.

1. Method

1.1. Participants

Participants were 190 undergraduates at a public university in the southeastern United States (78 men, M age = 20.3 years, SD = 2.6; 112 women, M age = 22.5 years, SD = 2.6). Men were aged 18 years to 28 years and women were aged 18 years to 29 years. Participants self-recruited by signing up on a notice board posted in a university building. The sign-up sheet stated that participants must be heterosexual. Participants received one credit towards a three-credit requirement as part of a General Psychology class.

1.2. Materials and procedure

Groups of participants completed a survey approved by the Institutional Review Board of the aforementioned university. The survey asked participants to report the frequency of their experiences with the use of physical attractiveness as a persuasive tactic between themselves and opposite-sex individuals whom they did not know very well. Participants provided frequency ratings on a 7-point scale with the following labels: 1 = never; 2 = rarely; 3 = seldom; 4 = sometimes; 5 = frequently; 6 = almost always; and 7 = always. The introduction to the survey included the following statement: "Sometimes people ask opposite-sex strangers or opposite-sex individuals whom they do not know very well, to do them a favor. Similarly, people sometimes offer to do favors for opposite-sex strangers or opposite-sex individuals whom they do not know very well. For instance, such favors might include: paying for a meal; not giving a speeding ticket; getting a full refund on something bought from a store; getting into a nightclub; getting an empty table in a busy restaurant; being allowed to go home early from work; buying a drink. Of course, the above are only a few of the favors that people do for others and you probably have experience of many other types of favors. The questions below are designed to find out about your own personal experiences of people doing favors."

To reflect the use of physical attractiveness as a persuasive tactic, where appropriate, questions explicitly stated that the persuaders were not physically attracted to the persuadees but gave the persuadees the impression that they were attracted to them. For example, Question 1 of the survey asked: "Even though you were not physically attracted to the person, have you ever attempted to persuade an opposite-sex individual whom you do not know very well to do you a favor by using your physical attractiveness or by giving the impression that you were physically attracted to the person?"

2. Results

Comparisons were conducted using two-tailed *t*-tests. In accordance with Prediction 1, of those individuals who had attempted to use their physical attractiveness as a tactic to persuade opposite-sex relative strangers to do favors, women gave a significantly higher mean rating than men ($M = 4.74$, $SD = 1.28$; $M = 5.32$, $SD = 1.12$) regarding the frequency of successfully using their physical attractiveness to persuade opposite-sex strangers to do favors [$t(162) = -3.04$, $p = .003$]. In accordance with Prediction 2, of those individuals who had experience with opposite-sex strangers attempting to use their physical attractiveness to persuade them to do favors, men gave a significantly higher mean rating than women ($M = 3.95$, $SD = 1.37$; $M = 2.44$, $SD = 1.18$) regarding the frequency of opposite-sex strangers successfully using their physical attractiveness to persuade them to do favors [$t(188) = 8.12$, $p = .000$]. In contradiction of Prediction 3, women did not provide a significantly higher mean rating than men ($M = 3.47$, $SD = 1.50$; $M = 3.41$, $SD = 1.47$) regarding the frequency of using their physical attractiveness in attempting to persuade opposite-sex strangers to do favors [$t(188) = 0.29$, $p = .772$]. In accordance with Prediction 4, men gave a significantly higher mean rating than women ($M = 4.52$, $SD = 1.06$; $M = 3.15$, $SD = 1.30$) regarding the frequency of opposite-sex strangers using their physical attractiveness in attempting to persuade them to do favors [$t(187) = 7.63$, $p = .000$]. In accordance with Prediction 5, men gave a significantly higher mean rating than women ($M = 2.79$, $SD = 1.40$; $M = 1.69$, $SD = 0.95$) regarding the frequency of having been persuaded to do favors by opposite-sex strangers using their physical attractiveness, only to later discover that the persuaders were not physically

attracted to them [$t(188) = 6.50$, $p = .000$]. In accordance with Prediction 6, men gave a significantly higher mean rating than women ($M = 3.27$, $SD = 1.94$; $M = 2.41$, $SD = 1.83$) regarding the frequency of feeling resentment after being persuaded to do favors by opposite-sex strangers using their physical attractiveness and becoming aware that the persuaders were not physically attracted to them [$t(186) = 3.08$, $p = .002$]. In contradiction of Prediction 7, women did not provide a significantly higher mean rating than men ($M = 2.55$, $SD = 1.27$; $M = 2.42$, $SD = 1.46$) regarding the frequency of experiencing opposite-sex strangers whom they had persuaded to do favors using their physical attractiveness expressing resentment when the individuals became aware that they were not physically attracted to them [$t(187) = 0.63$, $p = 0.53$].

3. Discussion

Despite the prevalence of the notion that, without engaging in sexual relations, women more than men are able to successfully use their physical attractiveness to get opposite-sex individuals to do favors, to the best of our knowledge this tactic had not been examined empirically. We asked men and women aged in their teens and 20s to report the frequency of their experiences with the tactic as used between them and individuals whom they did not know very well. The results provided support for the notion. In accordance with Prediction 1, of those individuals who had attempted to use their physical attractiveness as a tactic to persuade opposite-sex relative strangers to do favors, women gave a higher mean rating than men regarding the frequency of successfully using their physical attractiveness to persuade opposite-sex strangers to do favors. In addition, in accordance with Prediction 2, of those individuals who had experience with opposite-sex strangers attempting to use their physical attractiveness to persuade them to do favors, men gave a higher mean rating than women regarding the frequency of opposite-sex strangers successfully using their physical attractiveness to persuade them to do favors. Both these findings indicate that women have a greater success rate with the tactic than do men. In reality, the sex difference relating to Prediction 1 may be larger than that reflected in the current participants. As we outline below, this is because individuals' attempts to reduce cognitive dissonance they experience as a result of successfully using the tactic may cause women more than men to under-report successful use of it.

There is a question as to whether the results regarding these two predictions might be replicated in the reports of men and women in their teens and 20s who are neither American nor college undergraduates. Evidence suggesting they might be replicated is provided by Buss (1989a). Buss collected data from 10,047 participants from 37 samples drawn from 33 countries located on six continents and five islands. The mean age of the samples ranged from 17 years to around 29 years, with an overall unit-weighted mean of 23 years. For all 37 samples, Buss found that men placed a greater value on "good looks" in a potential mate than did women. In 34 samples this sex difference was statistically significant. For the three samples in which men did not place a significantly greater value on "good looks" than did women, men placed a significantly greater value on the quality "physically attractive" than did women. As the results regarding Prediction 1 and Prediction 2 are attributable to men more than women desiring physical attractiveness in mates, Buss' findings suggest that the results regarding these two predictions are likely to be secured with men and women in their teens and 20s of a broad diversity of backgrounds.

The current results regarding Prediction 1 and Prediction 2 may not be replicated, however, by studies with female participants not in their teens and 20s. The steady decline in women's fertility after their late 20s and in their reproductive value after their late

teens means that as women age beyond their late 20s men are increasingly less likely to find them physically attractive. Women who are not in their teens and 20s may be less successful using their physical attractiveness to persuade men than will women of ages in that range. This suggests value in future studies investigating the following: the success of women in their teens and 20s versus women older than their 20s using physical attractiveness as a tactic to persuade men; and the success of women older than their 20s versus men older than their 20s using physical attractiveness as a tactic to persuade opposite-sex individuals to do favors.

We also predicted that women use their physical attractiveness as a tactic to persuade opposite-sex individuals more frequently than do men. This prediction received mixed support. In contradiction of *Prediction 3*, women did not provide a higher mean rating than men regarding the frequency of using their physical attractiveness in attempting to persuade opposite-sex strangers to do favors. This suggests that because ancestral women's success rate with the tactic was greater than that of ancestral men, there may not have been sufficient evolutionary selection pressure for women more than men to have evolved a psychology that motivates them to use the tactic. In accordance with *Prediction 4*, however, men gave a higher mean rating than women regarding the frequency of opposite-sex strangers using their physical attractiveness in attempting to persuade them to do favors. Evolutionary psychological reasoning suggests an explanation for the contradictory findings of *Prediction 3* and *Prediction 4*. Due to the large reproductive benefits and small reproductive costs that men secure from each mating, it is more adaptive for them to misinterpret friendly behavior of women as signaling sexual interest than to misinterpret sexual overtures from women as friendly behavior (e.g., Haselton & Buss, 2000). Consequently, as the use of physical attractiveness as a persuasive tactic is designed to evoke sexual interest, men in the current study may have overestimated the frequency with which women have used the tactic in attempting to persuade them. As a result, the finding of a male-biased sex difference for *Prediction 4* may not reflect the relative frequencies with which men and women actually use the tactic.

In accordance with *Prediction 5*, men provided a higher mean rating than women regarding the frequency of having been persuaded to do favors by opposite-sex strangers using their physical attractiveness, only to discover that the persuaders were not physically attracted to them. In addition to being in accordance with the finding that women are more successful than are men in using the tactic, this supports the idea that individuals using the tactic create the impression that they are sexually attracted to the persuadees when in fact they are not.

Discovering that persuaders deceived them is likely to threaten the self-image of persuadees and cause them to experience cognitive dissonance (Festinger, 1957). Such persuadees, therefore, are likely to attempt to reduce this dissonance. Some individuals may convince themselves that their real motive for doing the favor was not the attractiveness of the persuaders but their desire to help a stranger in need. Alternatively, they may tell themselves that although they were fooled the last time, it was worth doing the favor because the next time they might gain sexual access to the persuader.

Successful persuaders who continue to use the tactic may attempt to reduce any cognitive dissonance they experience from using it. For instance, they may convince themselves that they did not give the impression that they were attracted to the persuadees. If women are more successful than men in using the tactic, this may have caused women more than men in the current study to under-report their use of the tactic. This may have resulted in the size of the sex difference in favor of women found regarding the frequency of successfully using the tactic to be smaller than it actually is. In addition, it may be another reason why, contrary

to *Prediction 3*, women did not provide a higher mean rating than men regarding the frequency of using the tactic. Alternatively, successful persuaders may convince themselves that they were justified in using the tactic by increasing their perception of the importance of the favor to them and reducing their perception of the inconvenience to the persuadees of doing the favor. There would be value in future research investigating whether persuaders and persuadees adopt the above approaches to reducing cognitive dissonance and whether there are sex differences in the use of the approaches.

We also argued that to facilitate persuadees in avoiding being repeatedly exploited, individuals would have evolved to experience resentment on becoming aware that persuaders who had successfully used their physical attractiveness to persuade them to do favors were not physically attracted to them. Moreover, we contended that if women are more successful in using the tactic, men would more frequently experience resentment than would women. In accordance with *Prediction 6*, men gave a higher mean rating than women regarding the frequency of feeling resentment on becoming aware that opposite-sex strangers who had successfully used the tactic on them were not physically attracted to them. In contradiction of *Prediction 7*, however, women did not provide a higher mean rating than men regarding the frequency of experiencing opposite-sex strangers whom they had persuaded to do favors using the tactic expressing resentment on becoming aware that they were not physically attracted to them. These contradictory findings may be due to women who had successfully used the tactic attempting to reduce the cognitive dissonance they experienced as a result of getting favors done through exploiting persuadees. Accordingly, these women may have reduced their perception of the frequency with which the men they successfully persuaded had expressed resentment.

A limitation of the current study is that it reports the frequency of participants' experiences with the use of physical attractiveness as a persuasive tactic only in terms of mean ratings of each sex. As such, we have not considered individual differences in ratings. For instance, although mean ratings indicated that generally women had a greater frequency of success with the tactic than did men, some women reported having a lower frequency of success with the tactic than did some men. A principal cause of such individual differences in ratings is likely to have been individual differences among participants in physical attractiveness. Although we did not assess the attractiveness of participants, the current findings indicate that the more attractive is the individual using the tactic, the more likely is the tactic to be successful. It may, however, be the levels of attractiveness of persuader and persuadee relative to each other that best determine the likelihood that the tactic will be successful. There would be value in future studies investigating this issue, perhaps through experimental manipulations.¹

In addition, future studies might investigate the impact on the use of the tactic of the social context in which it is used. Whether two individuals are socially isolated or being observed by others may influence both whether one individual decides to use the tactic and whether the other succumbs to it. For instance, if there were observers, would persuadees be more likely to succumb to the tactic in order to appear altruistic or less likely to succumb to the tactic for fear of appearing naïve?²

In sum, the current study found that among individuals in their late teens to late 20s, women are more successful than men in using physical attractiveness as a tactic to persuade opposite-sex strangers to do favors. This is the first study to provide empirical support for the popular notion that women are more successful

¹ We thank anonymous reviewers for raising these issues.

² We thank an anonymous reviewer for raising this issue.

with the tactic than are men. Although evolutionary reasoning and multiple empirical studies indicate that, of all individuals, women in their late teens to late 20s are likely to be most successful in pursuing the tactic, future research needs to be conducted to determine whether the notion is also true among individuals outside of this age range.

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