

Example 2

An experiment on how people judge individuals according to their physical appearance

Candidate's name:

Candidate's number:

Subject and Level: Psychology, Standard Level

Type of Study: Experiment

Number of words:

Session:

Abstract

This experiment was conducted in order to see whether people tend to judge individuals according to their physical attractiveness. The experiment was done at a Croatian high school with a national and an international section and the participants were students. The hypothesis stated that participants will tend to accuse the less attractive individuals more often, and that participants will tend to punish the less attractive individuals with stricter punishments. The obtained results tend to indicate that a higher percentage of participants tend to accuse less attractive individuals. Also, a higher percentage of participants tend to more severely punish less attractive individuals. These results seem to be in accordance with previous research (Dion, 1972).

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Introduction

We tend to judge our friends or unknown individuals in our everyday environment, but above this we even tend to judge children's behaviour according to their physical values. K. Dion has showed this in her experiment in which she described to a large number of women a child's misbehaviour such as throwing rocks at a dog. Afterwards the women were shown photographs of children: half of the subjects were shown attractive children and the other half was shown homely children. When the subjects were asked to evaluate the seriousness of the child's act, there was a significant difference between the conclusions of the two groups. Those who were presented the pretty child found excuses for his/her misbehaviour, while those presented the homely child were much stricter in their judgments. (Dion, 1972)

This would lead us to tentatively suggest the fact how personal qualities, especially physical appearance, play an important role in judging someone. We all care about our outfit and at the same time we pay attention to the appearance of other individuals. According to our primary judgment we also tend to divide people into different social categories and also assign them good or bad characteristics.

Aim: to investigate if physical attractiveness has an impact on (1) whether we think a person has misbehaved and (2) the severity of punishment deserved.

Method

An independent samples experiment was used, which involved manipulation of one variable and measurement of two other variables. The independent sample design was used so that participants would not figure out the true purpose of the experiment. Before the actual experiment was conducted, a pilot study was done to determine the attractiveness of individuals presented on photographs. In such a way, after obtaining the results, the two most attractive, the two most average, and the two most unattractive individuals (one female and one male picture on each form).

IV: level of attractiveness of an unknown individual (highly attractive, average and unattractive)

DV: (1) frequency of YES/NO responses to the first question; (2) frequency of the three types of punishment (slight, moderate or harsh)

Some control variables, which have been held constant and which may have had an effect on the DV include:

- The age of the participant

Communication between participants was not allowed.

Participants

The participants were students from a Croatian high school with a national and international section. The pilot study was conducted using randomly selected students from the psychology classes in the international section. The number of participants in the pilot study group was 15, and were aged between 17 and 19 years old. The subjects participating in the second part of the experiment attended the same school but were in the national section and were aged 15 to 16 years. There were a total of 72 participants in this part of the study.

These participants were selected by pulling names out of a hat to ensure a random procedure was used.

Materials

Paper with a number of photographs of unknown teenage individuals

Calculator

Standardized instructions

Questionnaires with the photographs and questions for the participants (see appendix iii)

Debriefing letter for the participants (see appendix iv)

Procedure

The first step to make was to collect 15 pictures of female and 15 pictures of male individuals. While collecting the pictures we had to make sure that the chosen individuals were approximately the same age as the target population and were of a good quality. The pictures were then passed through the psychology class who were asked to evaluate the physical appearance of each of the individuals presented. The scoring scale ranged from 1 to 10 – 1 representing the score of an extremely unattractive individual and 10 representing the score of an extremely attractive individual (see appendix i). After collecting the data, we had to calculate the mean and the standard deviation of each individual in order to decide upon which individuals will be chosen for the second part of the experiment (the results are shown in appendix ii). It was decided that attractive individuals should have a high mean and a low standard deviation; photograph showing an individual of average attractiveness should have a mean around 3 (average values of all scores given) and a small standard deviation.

Unattractive individuals chosen would have the lowest means and a small standard deviation. A small standard deviation means that most participants agree among themselves. All together 6 individuals were chosen: 2 attractive, 2 average and 2 unattractive with one female and one male of each. Two questions were formulated regarding the misbehaviour of the chosen individuals with which we questioned their guiltiness in an imaginary case. The questions were written in Croatian language, as the participants were from the national programme in the school. (Appendix iii shows one sample of the questionnaires in Croatian and its translated version in English.) The questionnaires were given with the same standardized instructions (appendix iii). Verbal informed consent was given and the participants' right to withdrawal and anonymity were ensured. After obtaining the data, all the participants were debriefed (the letter is shown in appendix iv).

Results

Graph 1: Presentation of the percentage of participants: how many of them answered YES and how many NO to the first question, in which the participants were asked if the individuals presented on the photograph actually performed the misbehaviour.

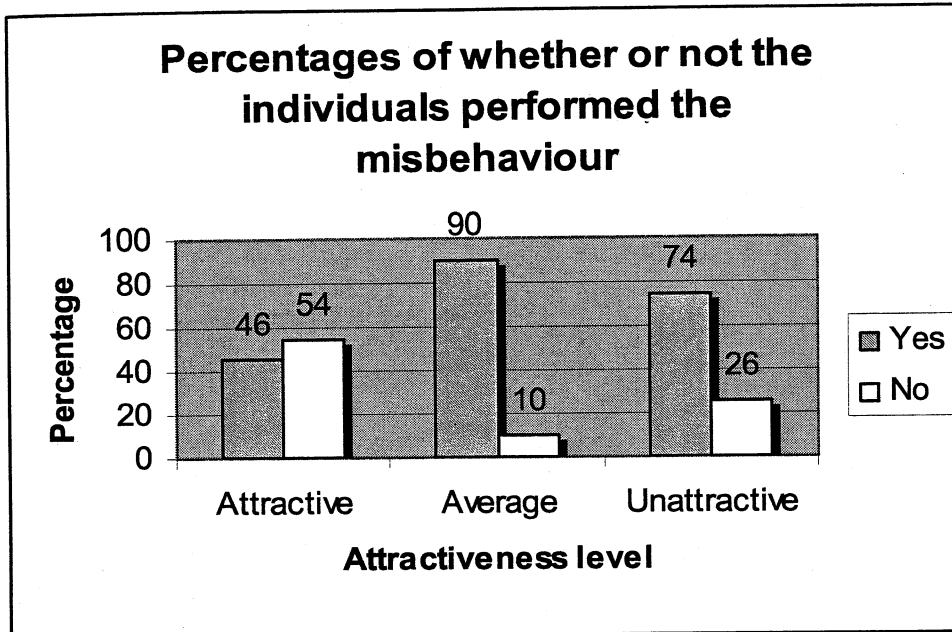


Table 1: numerical and percentage presentation of the same data as in graph 1.

	Attractive	Average	Unattractive
Yes	11 (46%)	19 (90%)	20 (74%)
No	12 (54%)	2 (10%)	7 (26%)

Graph 2: Presentation of the percentage of participants suggesting different types of punishments for attractive, average and unattractive individuals.

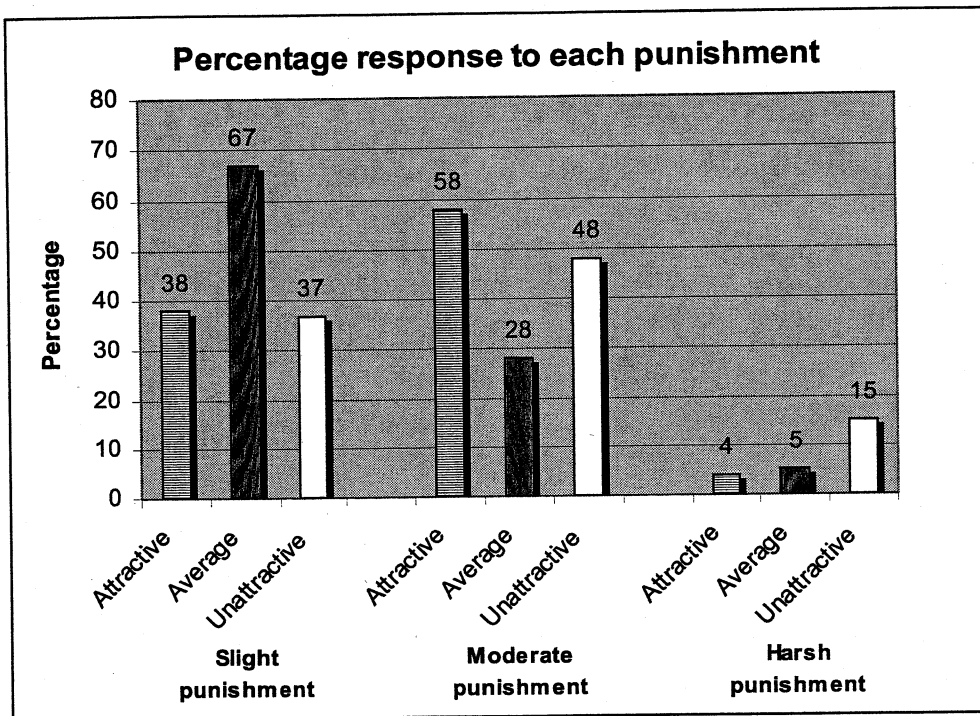


Table 2: Numerical and percentage presentation of the same data as in graph 2.

Punishment	Attractiveness	Percentage	Number
Slight	<i>Attractive</i>	38	9
	<i>Average</i>	67	14
	<i>Unattractive</i>	37	10
Moderate	<i>Attractive</i>	58	14
	<i>Average</i>	28	6
	<i>Unattractive</i>	48	13
Harsh	<i>Attractive</i>	4	1
	<i>Average</i>	5	1
	<i>Unattractive</i>	15	4

Discussion

In graph 1, I have presented the percentages of participants according to their answers on the first question. According to the hypothesis, it was predicted that less attractive students would be accused in a higher percentage of being capable to perform misconduct than the attractive individuals. Therefore, it was expected that the number of participants answering YES would decrease in accordance with the attractiveness of the individuals. Graph 1 shows that there is only a slight difference between the percentage of participants answering YES when evaluating average attractiveness (90%) and unattractive individuals (74%), but there is a bigger difference in the percentage of YES answers when evaluating attractive (46%) and unattractive (74%). These results tend to be similar to the results obtained in Dion's research (1977). The results obtained in Dion's research also tended to indicate that participants tended to more harshly accuse less attractive children.

According to the hypothesis, we were expecting that the percentage of choosing tougher punishments would be higher in the case when evaluating average and unattractive individuals. Participants tended to suggest the slightest punishment (a) in a higher percentage when evaluating average individuals (67%), while in the case of evaluating attractive and unattractive individuals for the same type of punishment, the percentage of answers was lower and only slightly different (38% and 37% respectively). When comparing the percentage of answers in the case of moderate punishment (b), the picture is very much different, almost the opposite of our expectations. In fact, attractive individuals were suggested this punishment in a higher percentage (58%), and unattractive individuals suggested the same punishment only in a bit lower percentage (48%). If we look at the case when the strictest punishment was suggested (c), we seem to get most supportive results. Namely, here it seems that participants tended to suggest this type of punishment in the highest percentage in the case of unattractive individuals (15%), whereas the percentages for attractive and average individuals are much lower.

There are several reasons for why our results could be biased. Judging fellow students is always a very delicate situation. Even though there are misunderstandings among students, they always tend to solidarity when it comes to a point of issue. The frequencies of all our answers are pretty low and very different. It suggests that no matter if the participant knows the student or not and might assume that he/she is a fellow student, will tend to suggest the slightest punishment no matter the actual circumstances. Actually, all our participants immediately after reading the questionnaire asked if the suspects were students from our school. Another reason why our results might be biased might be that some of the participants did not fully pay attention to the given task, and therefore gave irrelevant answers. There is also the problem in the students not being "independent". Probably insecure of his/her choice, the participants might consult a neighbor whose answer then influences him/her. But if I was to do the experiment again, I would suggest that participants be examined one by one, so that the possibility of other participants' influence is avoided to the full. It could also be manageable to create a stricter experimental environment, like the presence of a teacher while the participants are evaluated. In such a condition I am sure none of the participants would ask if the individuals are from our school or not. Strengths included the preliminary assessment of attractiveness as well as the employment of ethical guidelines.

In this experiment the obtained results tend to show that participants tend to accuse less attractive individuals in a higher percentage when evaluating the same act. Also, there is a higher percentage of participants who tend to more severely punish less attractive individuals.

Reference

Dion, K.K. (1972) Physical attractiveness and evaluation of children's transgressions. *Journal of Personality & Social Psychology*, 24, 207-213.

Assessment: examiner comments and marks

General Comments

This report includes all of the sections and headings as outlined in the internal assessment guidelines. The formatting is done quite well and the graphs are particularly appropriate. The candidate has included graphs that directly relate to the aim as noted at the end of the introduction. The candidate demonstrates a strong knowledge of experimental research methodology and has taken steps to reduce bias. Establishing the level of attractiveness by doing a pilot study on a somewhat similar group (that is, students at the same school) was a methodologically sound step. However, the candidate has not pointed out that this preliminary study was done on a group from within the school that has characteristics different from the target population—there may be some qualitative differences between students in the national and international sections. Most of the relevant information needed has been included, although it is not always in the most appropriate section (for example, some results are described in the discussion section).

Detailed Comments	Marks awarded	Maximum marks available
Criterion A: Introduction The aim is clearly and properly stated. The study being replicated is identified, but not explained beyond a basic description.	1	2
Criterion B: Method—Design The variables are identified and design is appropriate and justified. Ethical guidelines have been followed and controls identified.	2	2
Criterion C: Method—Participants The characteristics of the target population have been identified and random selection was used.	2	2
Criterion D: Method—Procedure Clearly described and easily replicable, with suitable examples in appendices.	2	2
Criterion E: Results The graphs are very well done. The results themselves are discussed, but are also spread across the results and discussion sections.	3	4
Criterion F: Discussion The discussion does attempt to relate the findings back to the study being replicated, but it is not fully developed. There are strengths and weaknesses identified, but some other highly relevant ones have not been addressed.	4	6
Criterion G: Presentation Excellent presentation overall. Good inclusion of appropriate information in the appendices. References are appropriate.	2	2
Total marks awarded	16	20