

Adults' Perceptions of Infant Sex and Cuteness¹

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Five experiments were conducted to investigate the relationship between infant sex and adults' perceptions of infant physical attractiveness. College students rated the cuteness and/or sex of male and female infants at each of six age levels: 3, 5, 7, 9, 11, and 13 months. The results indicated that (a) subjects had little difficulty assigning a sex label to infants, although in some instances the assigned label was incorrect; (b) older infants received higher cuteness ratings than younger infants; (c) cuter infants were more likely to be perceived as female than male; (d) Labeled Males received higher cuteness ratings than Labeled Females, although this effect was stronger for Perceived Males than for Perceived Females; and (e) perceived cuteness influenced perceived sex. Results are interpreted as generally supporting the existence of a sex stereotype related to physical attractiveness.

The present series of studies was designed to investigate the relationship between infants' sex and adults' perceptions of infants' physical attractiveness. Evidence from social psychology poignantly illustrates the importance of physical attractiveness for person perception and social interaction (Berscheid & Walster, 1974). The weight of available evidence supports the notion that a positive physical attractiveness stereotype (Dion, Bersheid, & Walster, 1972) operates along the lines of "What is beautiful is good." Physically attractive adults are assigned more positive personality attributes than are less attractive adults. For example, physically attractive individuals are perceived as being more sensitive, kind, interesting, strong, poised, modest, sociable, outgoing, and nurturant than are physically unattractive individuals (Dion et al., 1972). Moreover, there is

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some indication that the physical attractiveness stereotype is applied more strongly to women than to men (Bar-Tal & Saxe, 1976). Thus, an unattractive male is less likely to receive a negative personality evaluation than is an unattractive female (Miller, 1970).

Studies designed to assess the effects of physical appearance on child-child and child-adult interactions generally have produced results consistent with the physical attractiveness stereotype. For example, both peers and adults tend to perceive attractive children as more prosocial than unattractive children (Dion, 1972, 1973; Dion & Berscheid, 1974). Teachers have higher expectations for physically attractive children than for physically unattractive children (Clifford & Walster, 1973). Attractive children tend to have higher self-concepts than do less attractive children, presumably because these groups are treated differently by peers and adults (Salvia, Sheare, & Algozzine, 1975); and attractive children have greater incentive value for other children, especially females (Dion, 1977).

There are theoretical and empirical reasons for hypothesizing that adults apply a physical attractiveness stereotype to infants. Theoretically, ethologists have suggested that certain typically babyish facial features elicit care-giving and approach behavior from human adults (Lorenz, 1943). Although research is sparse, that which exists tends to provide general support for the ethological view (Hildebrandt & Fitzgerald, 1977a, 1977b, 1977c). Empirical support for the hypothesis that adults apply a physical attractiveness stereotype to infants is provided by a study in which experienced nurses were asked to rate the physical attractiveness and intellectual prognosis of premature infants (Corter, Trehub, Boukydis, Ford, Celhoffer, & Minde, 1976). Premature infants rated as most attractive also were rated as having the highest intellectual potential.

From this brief review it seems clear that physical attractiveness exerts a significant influence on social interactions from childhood through adulthood. Less clear are the specific factors that influence the individual's perception of physical attractiveness. Cross and Cross (1971) suggest that social-cognitive expectancies associated with gender may be one of the important factors that influence physical attractiveness attributions. They found that photographs of females were rated as more attractive than photographs of males, which suggests the hypothesis that people expect females to be more attractive than males (or confirms that females really are). Thus, the present series of studies was designed to determine whether adults' perceptions of an infant's physical attractiveness are influenced by their perceptions or knowledge of the infant's sex.

METHOD

Subjects

Introductory psychology and child psychology college students participated in one of five experiments. Subjects were tested in mixed-sex groups. All sub-