



## Book Review

*Facial Attractiveness: Evolutionary, Cognitive, and Social Perspectives*  
edited by Gillian Rhodes and Leslie A. Zebrowitz. 2002, Ablex Publishing, Westport,  
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Reviewed by James M. Donovan

Edited volumes are an imperfect format for the presentation of ideas, not least because their goals vary. Sometimes they aim simply to survey the field, at other times to synthesize and advance the field. I prefer the former for disciplines that by their nature are not disposed to achieve definitive statements (philosophy, for example). A volume on an empirical topic, however, by my judgment falls short if it closes without firm conclusions, if not on the topic itself, at least on the state of the art of its study.

*Facial Attractiveness* does fall short of this standard, but not for lack of serious effort (especially appreciated are such features as the summary table in Chapter 5). Although by any measure an excellent and thorough review of the major strands of its topic, the volume's authors are often in such direct conflict that the reader is disappointed that the editors do not, in the end, provide sufficient guidance about where the most productive research avenues lie. Every contribution is persuasive, but as they cannot all be correct, who is to win the day?

An obvious place to begin is with the question, What is "attractiveness"? Most writers seem unaware of the problem, and how it might impact their research methodology. What, the

reader wants to know, is the most defensible conceptualization of the focal phenomenon?

Often an author focuses explicitly on the *aesthetic* dimension of "attractive," treating it as a synonym for "beauty." A recurring phrase in the book is that "beauty is in the eye of the beholder," with the authors undertaking to argue whether this standard accurately describes social reality. They reach contradictory conclusions. Chapter 1 (by Adam Rubenstein et al.) finds the maxim to be a "myth" which, by chapter's end, is presumably dispelled; Anthony Little and his co-authors in Chapter 3, however, view their contribution as "help[ing] to place beauty back into the eye of the beholder." Other chapters take intermediate positions.

Besides the aesthetic, "attractive" can refer to raw sexual appeal, or to more long-term relationship evaluations. Which kind of attractiveness one intends will determine the proper methodology to use, and thereby impact the likely experimental results. As only one example, if one intends to investigate aesthetic attraction, the sexual orientation of the judges does not matter, whereas it matters a great deal if one intends to investigate sexual or relationship attraction. Yet no study discussed in these

chapters controlled for that variable, despite the fact that its relevance has been reported in the attractiveness literature (Donovan, Hill and Jankowiak, 1989). Too often experimenters follow the experimental protocol described in Gillian Rhodes et al.'s Chapter 2, wherein they simply ask participants to "choose the more attractive image," without operationalizing "attractive" with any greater precision. Caroline Keating's Chapter 6 provides a refreshing exception in that her protocols tried to capture the multiple aspects of attractiveness (but still errs in assuming that cross-sex judgments are thereby necessarily "heterosexual").

Michael Cunningham et al.'s contribution (Chapter 7) offers a more theoretical accounting for the multivalence of attractiveness. This advance, however, goes unacknowledged in the other chapters, underscoring a shortcoming of the volume as a whole. Only one chapter besides the editors', Karen Dion's Chapter 8, makes mention of any other chapter, suggesting that they wrote in isolation from what the other authors were saying. A more integrated volume would have resulted had the chapters responded to the arguments and claims presented elsewhere, allowing the reader to see how the contested conclusions could be integrated into a coherent assessment of the state of the art on this topic, or, if necessary, to choose between the competing models.

Other fundamental questions could be asked about the category of the "attractive." Most chapters here treat it as an objective property of the face and body; attractiveness is a quality that they possess, and the task of the experimenter is to isolate the features giving rise to this perception. Only a few chapters, including Magnus Enquist et al.'s Chapter 5, and especially Caroline Keating's Chapter 6, consider whether attractiveness does not instead emerge from the subjective interaction of the perceived and the perceiver, which seems the more likely process.

The real question is not, Who is attractive, but rather, Who is attractive to X. That is, after

all, how all of the experiments are constructed, as respondent's personal judgments. Someone is attractive because he or she "fits" in some sense with the needs, expectations or desires of the other, and it will be in this sense that "there is someone for everyone."

These same shortcomings can be illustrated by following the threads of the various arguments on the quality of "averageness." The issue is whether a composite stimulus (e.g., several photographs merged by various methods to form one image) is not judged more attractive than its individual contributing image. It is; the editors identify this as one of the most robust conclusions in the field. That initial finding well established, the task is to refine the method so as to explain the results. Here the consensus breaks down, and again, what seems to be a helpful conceptual contribution is ignored by all the other writers in the volume.

In Chapter 1 Adam Rubenstein and his colleagues address this phenomenon directly. They assert the strong conclusion (rejected by other contributors) that averageness "is the only characteristic discovered to date that is both necessary and sufficient to ensure facial attractiveness." They go on to argue that the phenomenon of finding averageness to be attractive is a result of more general cognitive mechanisms, and need not have been directly selected for by evolution. Rubenstein takes great pains to clarify what "average" means: "The term 'average' (more accurately referred to as 'averaged' face) refers only to the physical configurations of faces created by averaging multiple individual faces together mathematically... A mathematically averaged face is *not* average in perceived attractiveness."

The confusion against which he is warning is that of average as *prototype* and average as *typical* or modal. The suggestion that this distinction be marked as that between the "averaged" and the "average" is both helpful and, by everyone else in the book, ignored. They also tend to vacillate between what they mean by the term they do use. Sometimes it is a prototype,

but at other times it is merely the typical. Chapter 3, for example, defines “average” as “how closely [faces] resemble the majority of other faces within a population,” which refers to typicality, not prototype. Chapter 2 specifically refers to “average” as “the central tendency of a population.”

The difference can be critical. If an averaged face is prototypical, the attractive ideal can be constructed out of the elements of faces from the local population without necessarily settling on any form that actually exists there. In this sense, one would expect attractiveness judgments to be universal (which, in large measure, they are). If, on the other hand, an average attractive face reflects the population’s “central tendency,” then attractiveness judgments will be specific to the group (which they are not, for the most part. Note the hedges.).

A prototype approach also generates the prediction that vastly different faces can be judged equally attractive, because, however great their distance from each other, they are equally close to the prototype at the center. By contrast, where typicality is what determines the attractive average, what is important is the relationship of the individual face to the aggregate of the group, which would mean that outliers would *not* be average, and thus not attractive. Again, the first fits experimental data better than the second.

It matters, therefore, whether “average” is understood as prototype or typical, and this distinction is lost after the first chapter. While this volume presents all the necessary data to identify these and other problems in the field, it does little to resolve them.

This book will be most useful as a bibliographic resource for those approaching the topic for the first time, and as a thorough recapitulation of the key positions on central research interests on the question of physical attractiveness. Those readers hoping to find those positions comprehensively contrasted, evaluated, prioritized and even integrated will be disappointed. It is plausible that this limitation reflects the real condition of the subject area, and not the oversights of the editors, but an earlier, clearer warning of the conservative goals for the volume would have been appreciated by this reader.

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## Reference

Donovan, James M., Hill, Elizabeth, & Jankowiak, William R., (1989). Gender, Sexual Orientation, and Truth-of-Consensus in Studies of Physical Attractiveness, *Journal of Sex Research*. 26(2):264-271.