Contrast Effects and Ratings of Physical Attractiveness

Ninety-seven participants (52 women, 45 men) were divided into two groups. Participants in the positive contrast condition were exposed to photographs of highly attractive men and women prior to rating photographs of target stimuli of average physical attractiveness. Participants in the negative contrast condition were exposed to photographs of unattractive men and women prior to rating photographs of target stimuli of average physical attractiveness. After rating the target stimuli, participants in both groups rated their own level of physical attractiveness. Participants in the positive contrast condition rated target stimuli of average attractiveness significantly lower in physical attractiveness than did participants in the negative contrast condition. The tendency for participants in the negative contrast condition to rate their own level of physical attractiveness higher than did participants in the positive contrast condition approached, but did not reach, significance. The tendency for female participants to rate the target stimuli higher in attractiveness than male participants was marginally significant. Results suggest the influence of the media on our conceptions of beauty.

One need only look at magazine and television ads to see the importance society places on physical attractiveness. From an early age, women in our society are taught the commercialized art of correcting their physical imperfections. The importance placed on a woman’s physical appearance likely stems from the historical tendency for women in our society to be viewed as the property of men (Franzoi, Kessenich, & Sugrue, 1989). A woman who matches the societal standards of beauty is valued more highly than is a woman who does not meet these physical criteria (Franzoi et al., 1989), and a man’s social status is enhanced if he is in the company of an attractive woman (Sigall & Landy, 1973).

Men and women tend to agree about facial attractiveness level, both of their own sex and the opposite sex (Jackson, 1992). Because of the importance our culture places on physical attractiveness, researchers have studied the factors that influence judgments of attractiveness. One approach looks at the influence of contextual cues (i.e., the presence of stimuli that differ in attractiveness from the target). Investigators have looked at the existence of a contrast effect: targets are judged to be more or less physically attractive depending on the context in which they are viewed. For example, Kenrick and Gutierres (1980) tested the effects of prior exposure to attractive stimuli on judgments of the attractiveness of a target person of average attractiveness. Participants were 81 male, university dormitory residents who were asked to judge a potential blind date for another dorm resident. One group of participants watched the then popular television show Charlie’s Angels (featuring three beautiful women as the main characters) immediately prior to making their judgments; the control group, also dorm residents, was not exposed to the TV program. A contrast effect was observed: the group who viewed Charlie’s Angels rated the target significantly less attractive than did the control group.

Kowner and Ogawa (1993) conducted a similar experiment in Japan, using 337 Japanese male and female undergraduate students. The experimenters examined the existence of a physical attractiveness contrast effect on participants’ evaluation of their own attractiveness as well as on participants’ judgments of others’ attractiveness. Consistent with the findings of Kenrick and Gutierres (1980), both men and women displayed a contrast effect on judgments of the physical attractiveness of a target stimulus. The more attractive a prior stimulus, the lower was the evaluation of a target stimulus’ physical attractiveness. A similar contrast effect on self-evaluations occurred for female, but not male, participants.
Cash, Cash, and Butters (1983) assessed the effects of exposure to same-sexed peers of varying levels of physical attractiveness on one’s self-evaluation. It was predicted that participants (51 college women from an introductory psychology class) would see themselves as less physically attractive following exposure to attractive stimuli. Participants were exposed to same-sexed stimulus persons who were either not physically attractive, physically attractive, or highly attractive professional models. They were then asked to rate the level of their own physical attractiveness and to indicate their degree of satisfaction or dissatisfaction with various body parts. The predicted contrast effect was found for self-perceived attractiveness, but not for body parts satisfaction.

Melamed and Moss (1975) tested the hypothesis that context effects on social stimuli depend on associations that are established between the context and the target stimuli. Sixty participants were divided into two equal groups. Each group viewed 32 paired slides (constructed by photographing two pictures on each single slide). In the positive context condition, each slide contained a neutral and an attractive stimulus. In the negative context condition, each slide contained a neutral and an unattractive stimulus. The experiment was conducted in three phases. In the first phase, 26 individual black and white slides were presented and participants were asked to rate each slide (10 physically attractive white females, 10 physically unattractive white females, and 6 neutral white females) on 9-point scales for 5 different dimensions, including physical attractiveness. The second phase included the presentation of 1 of the 2 manipulations of the 32 paired slides. No ratings took place during this phase. In the final phase, participants rated the 26 slides from Phase 1. As hypothesized, a decrease in the ratings of the target stimuli in the positive context condition and an increase in ratings of the target stimuli in the negative context condition was observed.

Research shows that men and women tend to agree about facial attractiveness level, both of their own sex and the opposite sex (Jackson, 1992). Research (Kenrick & Gutierres, 1980; Kowner & Ogawa, 1993) also demonstrates a contrast effect when judging the physical attractiveness of target stimuli. Results concerning a contrast effect when judging one’s own level of attractiveness are equivocal (Cash et al., 1983; Kowner & Ogawa, 1993). Thus, the current research examines the effect of viewing either physically attractive stimuli or physically unattractive stimuli on judgments of the attractiveness of a target person of average attractiveness and on the evaluation of one’s own attractiveness.

It was hypothesized that participants who view photographs of attractive stimuli prior to viewing the photographs of average-looking peers will rate the average-looking peers lower in physical attractiveness than will participants who view photographs of unattractive stimuli prior to viewing the photographs of average-looking peers. It was also hypothesized that participants who view photographs of attractive stimuli will rate themselves less attractive than will participants who view photographs of unattractive stimuli.

Method
Participants
The participants were 52 female and 45 male undergraduate students who participated in the study in partial fulfillment of a course requirement. Participants ranged in age from 17 to 22 years.

Materials
Each participant received a 10-page packet consisting of 1 page of instructions and 9 pages of rating scales, 1 for each of the 8 stimuli presented and 1 for self-rating. To disguise the purpose of the study, six distracter dimensions (aggressive, sincere, stubborn, friendly, happy, bashful) were rated along with the critical dimension of physical attractiveness. Each page contained one 7-point rating scale for each of the seven dimensions, with 1 = not at all and 7 = very.

Procedure
Testing took place in groups of six to eight people. Participants were informed they would be shown slides of several people. After viewing each slide, they were to give their impressions of the person on a series of rating scales. Following these ratings, they were to provide some brief background information about themselves. Participants were divided into two contrast conditions. In one condition (positive contrast), participants were shown, in random order, slides of six highly attractive individuals, three men and three women, taken from popular magazines. Following this exposure, participants were shown slides of two individuals of average attractiveness, one male and one female, taken from a high school yearbook. In the second condition (negative contrast), participants were shown slides of six individuals of below average attractiveness, three male and three female, taken from a high school yearbook. Following this exposure, they were shown the same two slides of individuals of average attractiveness that were shown to the first group. The slides were selected through a pilot study in which the physical attractiveness level of 32 individuals was determined by 16 vol-
TABLE I

Perceived Attractiveness of Average-Looking Man, Average-Looking Woman, and Self as a Function of Contrast Condition and Sex

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Condition</th>
<th>Target stimulus</th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Average-looking man</td>
<td>Average-looking woman</td>
<td>Self</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Mean</td>
<td>SD</td>
<td>Mean</td>
<td>SD</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Positive contrast</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>3.55</td>
<td>1.18</td>
<td>3.77</td>
<td>1.45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>4.00</td>
<td>1.33</td>
<td>4.31</td>
<td>1.19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Negative contrast</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>3.91</td>
<td>1.54</td>
<td>4.39</td>
<td>1.56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>4.81</td>
<td>1.10</td>
<td>4.92</td>
<td>.98</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>3.73</td>
<td>1.37</td>
<td>4.08</td>
<td>1.52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>4.40</td>
<td>1.27</td>
<td>4.62</td>
<td>1.12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Participants. Each slide was shown for approximately 1 min; the participants then rated the person shown, and the next slide was presented. Participants then rated themselves on the seven dimensions.

Results

To test the hypotheses concerning a contrast effect, a multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) was computed with participant sex (male or female) and context condition (positive contrast or negative contrast) being the independent variables; physical attractiveness ratings of an average-looking man, physical attractiveness ratings of an average-looking woman, and ratings of self-attractiveness served as the dependent variables. The MANOVA yielded a significant main effect for context condition, $F(3, 91) = 3.12, p = .03$, and a marginally significant main effect for sex, $F(3, 91) = 2.51, p = .06$. No significant interaction effect was observed, $F(3, 91) = .01, p = .76$.

Univariate $F$ tests showed the significant effect of context condition held for ratings of the average-looking woman, $F(1, 93) = 5.45, p = .02$, and for ratings of the average-looking man, $F(1, 93) = 4.99, p = .03$; the effect for self-ratings approached, but did not reach, significance, $F(1, 93) = 2.76, p = .10$. In each case, the positive contrast condition led to lower ratings of attractiveness than did the negative contrast condition (see Table 1).

Univariate $F$ tests showed the significant sex effect held for ratings of the average-looking woman, $F(1, 93) = 4.01, p = .05$, and for ratings of the average-looking man, $F(1, 93) = 6.57, p = .01$. In each instance, female participants rated the target stimulus higher in physical attractiveness than did male participants. The effect did not hold for self-attractiveness, $F(1, 93) = .06, p = .80$.

Discussion

Participants in the positive contrast condition rated the target stimuli significantly lower in attractiveness than did the participants in the negative contrast condition. This contrast effect has implications for the influence of the media on our concept of beauty. The media presents a standard of beauty that affects everyone to some extent. Although television, movies, and magazines may not set these standards, they may be society’s most significant promoter of them. Downs and Harrison (1985) examined television commercials and estimated that the average viewer is exposed to approximately five messages per day that deal directly with beauty, making television commercials a powerful source of attractiveness standards. We compare our own attractiveness level, as well as the level of those we know, to the standard presented by the media. If that standard is skewed, so will be our perceptions of beauty. Myers and Biocca (1992) suggest that individuals internalize the idealized model of beauty represented in the mass media and media messages that emphasize the pursuit of this idealized model promote image distortions, particularly among young women. It has been hypothesized (Boskind-Lodahl, 1976) that the pressure on women to achieve this idealized image is one reason eating disorders have dramatically increased.

The judgment of attractiveness is largely a relative perception. The media both reflects and contrib-
utes to the attractiveness standard individuals use to make this judgment. The media is saturated with men and women of above-average attractiveness, thus altering the way the individual in today’s society views others and self. Being constantly exposed to attractive images may cause average-looking peers to seem relatively unattractive. It may also cause some individuals, primarily young women, to pursue a standard that is unrealistically high.

The purpose of this experiment was to examine the effects of contextual cues, viewing either physically attractive or physically unattractive stimuli, on judgments of the level of attractiveness of target persons of average attractiveness and on the evaluation of one’s own level of attractiveness. The findings, along with those of previous research, support the notion that the media influences what individuals and society deem physically attractive and unattractive. The current research focused on facial attractiveness. Even more important may be the consequences of the media’s influence on perceptions of somatic attractiveness. The emphasis on weight reduction in pursuit of the media’s ideal may lead some young women to engage in chronic dieting, producing emotional consequences such as irritability, anxiety, depression, and apathy (Keys, Brozek, Henschel, Mickelsen, & Taylor, 1950). Future research should investigate the contrast effect as it pertains to perceptions of somatic attractiveness and the relationship between media messages and distortion of body image. Until challenged, the standards of beauty established by the media will continue to flourish, leaving the public to deal with its probable consequences.

References