

## Humans are biased when it comes to beauty, study says

They may try to downplay it, but the beautiful people have it pretty good: They snag [hotter dates](#), score [free food](#) and land [higher-paid jobs](#). Now, behavioral neurologists are revealing the primal instinct driving our bias for beauty.

A new study, led by scientists at [Penn Medicine](#), seeks to understand our brain's response to people with facial abnormalities, such as scars, birthmarks, dysplasia and other "deformities." Their findings, published in [Scientific Reports](#), show an inherent bias against the "disfigured" and innate preference for the conventionally attractive.

"Judgements on attractiveness and trustworthiness are consistent across cultures, and these assumptions based on facial beauty are made extremely quickly," says lead study author Dr. Anjan Chatterjee, professor of neurology and director at Penn Center for Neuroaesthetics. "On the other hand, people with facial disfigurement are often targets of discrimination, which seems to extend beyond the specific effects of lower overall attractiveness and may tie in more with the pattern of results with stigmatized groups."

Previous neuroimaging studies have shown that attractive faces trigger more substantial responses in the reward, empathy, and social cognition sectors of the brain, compared to readings taken from more average faces. This study digs deeper by focusing on disfigured faces and analyzing whether surgical solutions mitigate the negative response.

"In order to right any discrimination, the first step is to understand how and why such biases exist, which is why we set out to uncover the neural responses to disfigured faces," Chatterjee says.

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The study involved two experiments, both using a set of pre- and post-op photographs from patients who underwent surgical treatment for their abnormalities. The first behavioral study enlisted 79 participants to find out whether or not they were aware of their beauty biases. An implicit association test (IAT) was used to determine where folks naturally fell when it came to judging disfigured faces. Then an explicit bias questionnaire (EBQ) assessed how conscious they were of their preference. While the participants showed no explicit bias on the EBQ, researchers saw a clear implicit preference for the non-disfigured faces, especially among men.

The second experiment involved a functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI) test to observe the neural response to the photo sets. The authors found an increase in activity in the ventral occipito-temporal cortical areas, which deals with vision processing, and decreases in the regions associated with empathy, specifically the anterior cingulate and medio-prefrontal cortex.

All this tells researchers that, in spite of common courtesy, people are unconsciously harboring negative biases against less attractive and disfigured faces, resulting in an inherent lack of empathy. The diminished activity in the anterior cingulate cortex also indicates a neural flag for dehumanization, supported by previous studies which show a similar response to other stigmatized groups, such as drug addicts or homeless people.

“The emphasis of attractiveness and its association with positive attributes highlights the pervasive effect of appearance in social interaction,” says Chatterjee. “While we found that corrective surgery mitigates negative social and psychological responses to people with facial anomalies, we are also exploring alternative strategies to minimize bias towards people with facial conditions.

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