Appearance as a Contingency of Self Worth: A Lab Manipulation

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Contingencies of Self-Worth Theory
Crocker & Wolfe, 2001

- People base self-esteem on different domains
- Outcomes received in contingent domains determine whether self-esteem is high or low
Appearance as a Contingency of Self-Worth

The attractiveness of a face in particular is relevant to perception and behavior.

- Self-perceived facial appearance & self-esteem
  - (Smith, Burlew, & Lundgren, 1991).

- Facial attractiveness & dating, sexual experiences
  - (Wiederman & Hurst, 1998)

- “What is beautiful is good”
  - (Eagly, Ashmore, Makhijani, & Longo, 1991)
Goals of the present study

- CSW research largely correlational
- Goal:
  - provide a lab manipulation demonstrating a causal impact of negative feedback in a contingent domain
The present study

- 2 x 2 between groups factorial design

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<th>Non-contingent</th>
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Method

- 51 female participants
- Participants completed several pre-test measures
  - Appearance contingency
    - “When I think I look attractive, I feel good about myself.”
    - 1-7 Likert; alpha=.63
  - Trait self-esteem
    - “I take a positive attitude toward myself.”
    - 1-7 Likert; alpha=.63
  - Self-perceived attractiveness
    - “I consider myself to be a physically attractive person.”
    - 1-5 Likert
Method

- Participants run 1 at a time
- Cover story: Investigate how people form first impressions about each other.
- Experimenter took participant’s photograph
  - “anonymous peer” rated photo for attractiveness
Method

- No other peer existed
- Negative feedback condition: Participants received very low attractiveness rating

**IMPRESSION FORMATION TASK**

**QUESTION #1:**

You have seen a photograph of your partner. Please indicate how physically attractive you think your partner is on the scale below:

-4          -3          -2          -1          0          1         2          3          4

very unattractive

extremely attractive
Method

- Primary dependent variable
  - appearance state self-esteem
    - “I am pleased with my appearance”
    - 1-7 Likert; alpha = .88
Results

- Manipulation check; \( t = 3.85; \ p < .001 \)
  - positive = 3.04; negative = 2.21

- Appearance CSW
  - \( M = 5.35 \ ( .88 ); \ Mdn = 5.60 \)
Results

- 2 (contingent/not) x 2 (positive/negative) ANCOVA
  - Covariates: trait self-esteem & self-perceived attractiveness
Results

- main effect of feedback
  - $F(1,51) = 3.75; \ p = .06$

- main effect of appearance
  - $F(1,51) = 3.68, \ p = .06$

- interaction
  - $F(1,51) = 4.61, \ p = .04$
Interaction

Contingent non-contingent

Positive Negative

3.87 3.9

4.81 3.87
Interaction

**Contingent**
- Positive: 3.87
- Negative: 3.9

**Non-Contingent**
- Positive: 4.81
- Negative: 3.87
Interaction

contingent non-contingent
positive negative

3.87 3.9 4.81 3.87
Discussion

- Thought-listing task
  - Administered prior to state self-esteem scale
  - Should show more defensive and/or “low self-esteem” responses