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Author(s): Felicia R. Parks and Janice H. Kennedy
Source: Journal of Black Studies, Vol. 37, No. 6 (Jul., 2007), pp. 936-943
Published by: Sage Publications, Inc.
Stable URL: http://www.jstor.org/stable/40034962
Accessed: 21/02/2014 09:42

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THE IMPACT OF RACE, PHYSICAL ATTRACTIVENESS, AND GENDER ON EDUCATION MAJORS’ AND TEACHERS’ PERCEPTIONS OF STUDENT COMPETENCE

FELICIA R. PARKS
JANICE H. KENNEDY
Georgia Southern University

Stereotypical thinking and prejudgments from teachers have been found to hinder students’ academic and social performance. The relationship between students’ race, physical attractiveness, gender, and perceived academic and social competence by both undergraduate education majors and practicing teachers was investigated. Participants were 72 individuals (51 teachers, 21 undergraduate education majors) at a midsized university. Participants viewed eight scenarios (varying by race, gender, and physical attractiveness of target child) in which a child’s picture was displayed. Participants then rated the child’s social and academic competence on an eight-question, 5-point, Likert-type scale. A 4-way (Child Gender × Child Race × Child Physical Attractiveness × Rater Educational Level) mixed factorial design was used to test the hypotheses. Results showed that the lowest competency ratings were for Black, unattractive boys. No differences were found for ratings by teacher education level. These findings have implications for training of classroom teachers.

Keywords: physical attractiveness; race; gender; education; teacher

Classic research in social psychology and education has supported the view that subtle physical characteristics such as physical attractiveness, gender, age, socioeconomic status, and race may affect initial impressions formed by others (e.g., Adams, 1978; Bennet,
Dion et al. (1972) found that participants had a tendency to rate individuals who were attractive as being more competent, having more satisfying and fulfilling lives, and being more likely to succeed—a finding they called the “what is beautiful is good” phenomenon. People who approximate the ideal standard for beauty are considered to possess more positive personality characteristics than do less attractive people.

Classroom teachers are certainly not immune to the “what is beautiful is good” phenomenon. Studies (e.g., Clifford, 1975; Ritts, Patterson, & Tubbs, 1992) of teachers’ expectations about students suggest that physical attractiveness is associated with academic expectancies and intellectual capabilities in the classroom. Teachers do in fact have a tendency to rate attractive students more favorably in regard to intelligence, social skills, academic capabilities, and achievement scores. Attractive students have also been viewed as more outgoing and as having more leadership potential and social skills and higher self-esteem (Kenealy, Frude, & Shaw, 1987; Maag, Vasa, Kramer, & Torrey, 1991; Ritts et al., 1992). Moreover, the transgressions of attractive students are not rated as severely and are more likely to be attributed to external factors than are those committed by unattractive students (Dion, 1972).

Research has shown that both the race and gender of a student affect teachers’ perceptions as well. For example, Rubovitis and Maehr (1973) reported that Black gifted children received less praise and were more prone to criticisms and being ignored by their teachers as compared to White gifted children. Black students are also more likely to be subjected to corporal punishment for misbehavior in school than White students are (Kennedy, 1995). In a recent comparison of teacher expectations of Black, Asian, and White students, Chang (2003) reported no biases against Black students, but Asian students were expected to show more “overcontrolling” traits than were either Black or White students.

With regard to gender, girls are viewed as being more serious about their school work and more compliant and having better work habits in the classroom—factors that may contribute to girls’
greater success in the classroom in the early grades (Fabregat, Almacellas, & Beltri, 1999; Smith, 1998). Boys receive more direction and criticism from their teachers than girls do (Bennett, Guttesman, Rock, & Cerullo, 1993; DeVoe, 1991) and are expected to demonstrate more disruptive behaviors than girls (Maniadaki, Sonuga-Barke, & Kakouros, 2003).

Teachers’ biases or assumptions about students’ capabilities and behavior can have both major and subtle implications for students’ social and academic outcomes. Stereotyping and biases may cause children to be treated differently. When the bias is positive, students may benefit from the exceptional expectations placed on them. However, when biases are negative, students’ behavior may become entangled in an ongoing spiral where less is expected of them and less is produced by them, thus confirming the original expectations of the perceiver in a self-fulfilling prophesy (Brophy, 1983; Rosenthal, Baratz, & Hall, 1974; Rosenthal & Jacobson, 1968).

Early studies (e.g., Marwit, Marwit, & Walker, 1978) suggested that biases based on race are not evident prior to student teaching. In today’s educational curricula, diversity training is usually a significant part of one’s preparation for classroom teaching. It was hypothesized in the present study that practicing teachers would be influenced more by a child’s physical features than undergraduate education majors would because undergraduate students might be more influenced by recent and more explicit diversity training incorporated into their curriculum than teachers, who are not so recently trained.

The purpose of the present study was to investigate the claim that students’ perceived social and academic competence is partially based on superficial physical characteristics such as race, gender, and physical attractiveness. It was hypothesized that: (a) White children would be rated as more competent than Black children, (b) girls would be rated as more competent than boys, (c) attractive children would be rated as more competent than unattractive children, and (d) more experienced teachers would show greater bias for physical features exhibited by children than individuals currently being trained as teachers.
METHOD

PARTICIPANTS

Participants included 72 individuals (57 women, 14 men) enrolled in summer term education courses at a midsized Southern university. Of these individuals, 51 were teachers working toward advanced degrees or certification requirements, and 21 were undergraduates enrolled in an education program. Of the participants, 85% were White and 15% were Black. The mean age of participants was 29.96 years ($SD = 8.37$).

MATERIALS

Photographs. A total of 100 photographs from a 10-year-old elementary school yearbook were randomly selected and photocopied. Ten graduate students and faculty from the Department of Psychology rated each picture on a 10-point Likert-type scale from attractive to unattractive. From these scores, eight pictures were selected for use in the study—four of boys and four of girls (2 White, 2 Black; 2 high in attractiveness, 2 low in attractiveness). Parent or student (if no longer a minor) permission was given for the use of the pictures in the study.

Questionnaire. For each of the eight photographs, a short scenario that described both a mildly positive and a mildly negative attribute of the child was developed. For example, “Alecia’s favorite subject in school is reading. She likes to play softball after school, but she isn’t as good at it as some of the other girls.” The descriptions of the child were meant as distractors from the real purpose of the study: to determine the role of physical characteristics in judging one’s social and academic competence. An eight-question, 5-point, Likert-type scale that measured the participants’ views about the target child’s academic and social competence was developed. Scores could range from 40 (high competence) to 8 (low competence).
PROCEDURES

In a classroom setting, participants viewed each of the eight photographs of elementary-school-aged children with the accompanying scenarios. Participants were asked to rate the child’s social and academic competence on the eight-question, 5-point, Likert-type scale. They completed the forms in small groups in about 8 to 12 minutes. They were thanked for their participation and debriefed.

A 4-way mixed factorial design was used. The dependent variable was perception of the student’s social and academic competence as measured by the competence scale. There were three within-subjects variables: race, gender, and physical attractiveness (each with two levels) and one between-subjects variable (practicing teacher or undergraduate).

RESULTS

To determine whether variables of rater educational level, child sex, child attractiveness, and child race predicted ratings of competence, a 4-way analysis of variance in which there was one between-subjects variable (participant educational level) and three within-subjects variables (child sex, child attractiveness, and child race) was conducted. Means and standard deviations are given in Table 1. Although a significant effect was not found overall, univariate tests showed a three-way interaction for race, child attractiveness, and child sex, $F(1, 67) = 6.46, p = .01$. Post hoc analyses showed that Black, unattractive boys were rated as lower in competence than were other groups. There was no effect for educational level of participant.

A trend was found for an interaction between child race and attractiveness, $F(1, 67) = 3.78, p = .06$. Post hoc analysis showed that Black, unattractive children (both boys and girls) were rated lower in competence than were children in other categories.
TABLE 1
Competency Scores by Child’s Race, Gender, and Physical Attractiveness

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Race</th>
<th>White</th>
<th></th>
<th>Black</th>
<th></th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>M</td>
<td>SD</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>SD</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Girls’ attractiveness</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High</td>
<td>29.15</td>
<td>3.32</td>
<td>26.97</td>
<td>2.82</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low</td>
<td>27.67</td>
<td>3.08</td>
<td>26.64</td>
<td>3.11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Boys’ attractiveness</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High</td>
<td>27.38</td>
<td>2.93</td>
<td>27.97</td>
<td>2.83</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low</td>
<td>27.68</td>
<td>2.97</td>
<td>24.21</td>
<td>3.08</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

DISCUSSION

Unattractive children, particularly boys, were perceived as less competent by teachers and teachers in training than were more physically attractive children. This was particularly true for Black children. Because teachers play such a critical role in a child’s academic and personal growth, it is important that educators are aware that the expectations or different perceptions that they have for children can be supportive or detrimental to a child’s academic career (Smith, 1998). It is somewhat surprising that results in the current study corroborate the earlier research from the 1960s and 1970s in this area. Diversity training seems to be a part of teacher training programs throughout contemporary education curricula at both the graduate and undergraduate levels. However, just because students are exposed to a concept does not mean that they will incorporate its values into their teaching philosophy and practice. Teachers are surely aware through their training and prior research that stereotypical thinking can have detrimental effects in the classroom; they must become more cognizant of their own biases and in turn reduce them. Apparently, teachers are being influenced by subtle stereotypical indicators of potential academic and social success and failure in the classroom. More diversity workshops and multicultural programs for school personnel need to be implemented to
increase the appreciation of cultural and ethnic diversity, including practical application related to one’s own teaching style and goals.

Further research should also include biases of others who work with children in the schools such as administrators and special services professionals (e.g., speech therapists, school psychologists). Increased training and practical application should help those who work with children to provide a positive learning environment for all children, regardless of gender, race, and physical characteristics.

REFERENCES


Felicia R. Parks was a McNair Scholar and psychology major at Georgia Southern University. This article is the result of her McNair Scholar research project completed under the supervision of the second author. Ms. Parks plans to study school psychology in graduate school. An earlier version of the article was presented at the National Association of School Psychologists in 2003.

Janice H. Kennedy is professor of psychology at Georgia Southern University. Her specialty is developmental psychology, with particular interests in mother-child attachment relationships, school performance, and social competence.