Effects of Attractiveness and Nature of Request on Helping Behavior

RALPH JUHNKE
BERNIE BARMANN
MIKE CUNNINGHAM
EDWARD SMITH
KRIS VICKERY
JEFF HOHL
JOSHUA QUINONES

Department of Psychology
Claremont McKenna College

ABSTRACT. The effects of American college students' appearances and the nature of their requests for assistance were investigated in a field experiment. Well- and poorly dressed students asked directions from randomly chosen passersby to either higher-status (a tennis club) or lower-status (a thrift shop) locations. Results indicated that the greatest assistance, measured as the amount of time spent by subjects giving directions, was given to poorly dressed students who asked directions to the lower-status location.

IN SOME CIRCUMSTANCES, physical attractiveness can influence others' reactions, and it can be advantageous to consider the evaluations that appearance cues foster. For example, appearances can influence others' help-giving in emergency situations (e.g., Piliavin, Piliavin, & Rodin, 1975). Whether appearances influence helping in nonemergency interactions, however, has not been demonstrated unambiguously. Some studies have concluded that physically attractive individuals, compared with less attractive persons, receive more help (Benson, Karabenick, & Lerner, 1976; Harrell, 1978; Harris & Bays, 1973; Raymond & Unger, 1972; Wilson, 1978). Others report no effect for appearance (Juni & Roth, 1981), and a minority of studies report greater help to individuals whose appearance is abnormal (Bull & Stevens, 1980). When differences in help-giving have been observed, interactions of

Requests for reprints should be sent to Ralph Juhnke, Department of Psychology, Claremont McKenna College, Claremont, CA 91711.
physical attractiveness with variables such as gender, race, and other behaviors have been frequently noted. Variations in dress and facial features and traditional manipulations of attractiveness seem to have different effects in different contexts, and the appropriateness of appearance in the situation in which it is encountered will be an important influence on helping. It seems likely that physical attractiveness is a potentially salient cue that can, in the presence of other relevant stimuli, elicit helping. People may not react spontaneously to attractiveness alone, but may require a convergence of information before helping. Specifically, compliance with some requests may be augmented by physical attractiveness, whereas compliance with others may be less affected. Past research has not concentrated on the combined influences of attractiveness and other stimuli; it has not addressed sufficiently the specific effects of appearances that are associated with other aspects of nonemergency situations. One of the “other aspects” receiving insufficient attention is the nature of the request for assistance. Physical attractiveness may be more likely to affect helping responses when attractiveness is congruent with the implications of the request for assistance.

Harris and Bays (1973) reported that the nature of confederates’ requests and their appearances influenced help-giving. When femininely dressed confederates made “feminine” requests of male subjects, they received more assistance than when they were masculinely dressed or made neutral requests. The generality of Harris and Bays’ results, however, is severely limited, as main effects for type of request and sex of subject were not reliable, perhaps due to the nature of their feminine request and its likely affect on male subjects. Additionally, they observed small numbers of subjects and investigated dichotomous effects that may have been too subtle to be detected by statistics that are not sensitive to the combined effects of variables.

The present study investigated effects of attractiveness within contexts provided by requests for assistance to extend previous research beyond sex role differences. Although previous researchers have not emphasized interactions of attractiveness and contextual variables to affect help-giving, the present study did so and also expected that compliance with requests would depend on the congruence of requests for assistance and appearances of the requesters.

Method

Subjects

The subjects were 240 randomly selected American shoppers who were entering or leaving one of three large supermarkets or a discount department store. The majority appeared to be between 30 and 50 years of age, and all were Caucasian. Twenty subjects, distributed equally across the experimental
treatments, did not comply with requests for assistance because they could not give directions to the locations of interest. Because the dependent variable was the amount of time spent giving directions, these 20 individuals were not included in the experiment.

Procedure

Each of the five male and one female undergraduates, dressed well or poorly, approached 40 subjects and requested directions to one of two locations. Subjects were assigned randomly to a 2 \times 2 (Appearance \times Request) factorial design, and each undergraduate contributed data to each treatment of the design. The six undergraduates were Caucasian. Half of the subjects approached by each undergraduate were asked for directions to an exclusive tennis club in the vicinity; it was believed that the exclusivity of the club would be known to most subjects and that its location was familiar. A two-sentence request for directions was delivered in the same way by all undergraduates. The remaining subjects were asked for directions to a thrift shop located at a well-known intersection in the vicinity and in a less desirable area of the community; it was believed that an impression of lower status would be widely shared. Again, a two-sentence request for directions was delivered in the same way by all undergraduates. Interviews with an additional 100 randomly chosen people at the locations where data were collected indicated that the majority (90%) was familiar with the locations of both the tennis club and the intersection at which the thrift shop was located. Those same 100 respondents indicated their evaluations (1 = extremely low; 5 = extremely high) of the status of 15 businesses in the vicinity, among those being the tennis club and the thrift shop. Ratings of the thrift shop ($M = 1.89$) were significantly lower than those of the tennis club ($M = 4.12$), $t(99) = 18.26$, $p < .001$.

The physical attractiveness of the undergraduates was manipulated by altering the manners in which they were dressed. In the attractive condition, they wore clean and conservative clothes, their hair was clean and combed, and males were cleanly shaven. In the unattractive condition, male undergraduates drew small crosses on their arms to simulate tattoos, rolled packs of cigarettes into the sleeves of their dirty tee-shirts, wore torn and dirty trousers, were unshaven, and left their hair uncombed. The female undergraduate wore ripped and dirty trousers and a dirty blouse, left her hair uncombed, and smudged her eye makeup.

The undergraduates worked in pairs. As one undergraduate approached every fifth person who passed a predetermined point (e.g., a newspaper vending machine), the other observed unobtrusively and timed the interaction that occurred. Timing began when a request for directions had been delivered and ended when a subject departed. Intervals between subjects were sufficiently
long enough for subjects to depart the immediate vicinity, and the undergraduates relocated occasionally to diminish suspicion and effects of modeling.

Results

A statistical comparison of interaction times indicated that subjects spent significantly more time with one of the male undergraduates regardless of the treatment in which he requested directions. The data provided by that experimenter, therefore, were not included in the analysis, and data recorded for the remaining undergraduates were aggregated. (As we have proposed, influences other than physical appearance operate in nonemergency helping situations. What characteristic was influential in the case of the excluded male undergraduate is not obvious, but it is clear that subjects' responses were not due to difference in dress, the principal independent variable. Because the independent variable may not have been manipulated sufficiently in the case of the single male undergraduate, the data he provided were not considered.)

A 2 × 2 (Appearance × Request) Analysis of Variance indicated that time spent (in seconds) with well-dressed undergraduates ($M = 24.16$) did not differ significantly ($p < .08$) from that spent with poorly dressed undergraduates ($M = 27.84$), and time spent giving directions to the tennis club ($M = 24.01$) did not differ significantly ($p < .06$) from that spent giving directions to the thrift shop ($M = 27.89$). The interaction of appearance and nature of request, however, was statistically significant, $F(1, 176) = 14.27$, $p < .001$. Comparisons of treatment means were accomplished by the Scheffé procedure ($p < .05$). Significantly more time ($M = 32.92$) was spent with poorly dressed undergraduates seeking directions to the thrift shop than with poorly dressed undergraduates seeking directions to the tennis club ($M = 21.90$). When the undergraduates were well-dressed, subjects did not differ reliably in time spent giving directions to the thrift shop ($M = 22.30$) or to the tennis club ($M = 25.98$). Time spent with poorly dressed and well-dressed undergraduates seeking directions to the thrift shop differed reliably, but numbers of seconds spent giving directions to the tennis club did not differ according to appearances.

Discussion

The greatest assistance, defined as time spent giving directions, was provided to less attractive undergraduates associated with a lower-status destination. When undergraduates were well-dressed, assistance did not depend on their destinations, and assistance to find a higher-status location did not differ according to appearances. That assistance to well-dressed individuals tended to be less extensive than to those poorly dressed suggests that the frequently observed benefits of attractiveness may be, in part, contextual. Physical ap-
appearance benefited most when it was most congruent with other cues associated with the need to help.

Two related explanations for the result can be offered. First, perceptions of appearances within the contexts of the requests may have prompted stereotyped associations that mediated helping responses (cf. Dermer & Thiel, 1975; Dion, Berscheid, & Walster, 1972). One of the undergraduates in the present study believed, for example, that people may have associated poor dress with poverty, and that poor people may be stereotyped as less intelligent. When he was dressed poorly, people explained the directions slowly and clearly. When he was well-dressed, directions were given more quickly. Increased assistance to those poorly dressed, especially when they sought directions to the thrift shop, seemed to reflect a degree of patronization, "an attitude which pervades the phenomenological and sociocultural mores of dealing with 'unfortunate' others" (Juni & Roth, 1981).

Second, stereotyped associations may have been enhanced differentially as the requests may have made the undergraduates' physical appearances differentially salient. When poorly dressed undergraduates sought directions to the thrift shop, greater sensitivity to their "plight" may have resulted and norms of helpfulness may have directed subjects' behaviors (cf. Benson et al., 1976). Perhaps subjects reasoned that poorly dressed people would seek a thrift shop for one reason only (because they cannot afford to go elsewhere to shop), and greater assistance was mediated by appreciation of norms regarding help to the disadvantaged. Well-dressed people may go to thrift shops, and both well- and poorly dressed people may go to tennis clubs, for a number of reasons that do not make helping norms relevant. Whether physical appearance fostered helping, therefore, may have been influenced by the salience of that appearance and its information value in the context. In the context of a request for directions to the tennis club, physical appearance was both less salient and less relevant. Attractions regarding desires to go to the thrift shop, however, could involve physical appearance as quite relevant diagnostic information. In general, assistance in nonemergency situations may depend on the operation of heuristics that associate helping responses with a confluence of appearance cues that support the rationale for the request.

REFERENCES


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