Perspectives on social attributions (PS4029/30)

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**Course overview**

Face preferences influence important social outcomes such as hiring decisions, partner choice and associate choice. Furthermore, people considered attractive are ascribed many other positive traits (e.g. trustworthiness) that confer social benefits. This course discusses the characteristics that determine attractiveness judgments in terms of the 2 key theoretical frameworks adopted in attractiveness research (the perceptual bias and evolutionary advantage views). Evidence for and against these views from developmental, biological, comparative, cross-cultural, social, visuo-cognitive and fMRI studies is discussed.

**Reading**

All reading material (excluding textbook chapters) can be downloaded from the course website (you need a username and password to access this site – both are ‘faces’ without the apostrophes)

The address for the course website is:  
[http://www.abdn.ac.uk/~psy411/dept/Teaching/perspectives](http://www.abdn.ac.uk/~psy411/dept/Teaching/perspectives)

In addition to this reading, chapters in the course textbook address lecture topics more generally.


Other books with chapters useful as introductions to the topic are:

- Vicki Bruce & Andy Young, *In the Eye of the Beholder: The Science of Face Perception*

Students who wish to read beyond the papers and chapters suggested on this page should contact BC Jones.

**Lecture Summaries**

Overheads for each lecture are on the course website

**Lecture 1. Why study facial attractiveness?**

This lecture will outline the evidence that a person’s facial appearance influences how they are treated during social interactions and that attractiveness is an important factor in associate and partner choices. The tendency for positive personality traits to be
automatically ascribed to attractive people (the attractiveness ‘halo effect’) will also be discussed.

Recommended reading: Jones (Thesis Ch. 1) [this is a useful introduction to face preference research]
Textbook: Introduction
Study Q1: Discuss the evidence for attractiveness ‘halo effects’ [suggested reading: Langlois et al., 2000]
Study Q2: Discuss aspects of social behavior that are influenced by attractiveness [suggested reading: Langlois et al., 2000]

Lecture 2. Evidence for universal face preferences

This lecture will discuss cross-cultural comparisons of preferences for symmetric faces as evidence for high agreement among individuals in what facial characteristics are attractive. This issue will also be discussed in light of infants’ face preferences.

Recommended reading: Rhodes et al. (2002), Thornhill and Gangestad (1999)
Textbook: Chapter 2
Study Q1: Discuss infants’ face preferences as evidence for universal face preferences [suggested reading: Slater and Kirby, 1998]
Study Q2: Discuss the facial characteristics preferred by people from diverse cultures [suggested reading: Perrett et al., 1998; Perrett et al., 1994]

Lecture 3. Theories of universal face preferences I: Perceptual bias view of symmetry preferences

The previous lecture demonstrated that attractiveness judgements, and symmetry preferences in particular, are to some degree ‘universal’. This lecture introduces the perceptual bias view of symmetry preferences. This view posits that symmetry preferences are a by-product of the ease with which the visual system processes symmetric stimuli of any kind.

Recommended reading: Jansson et al. (2002)
Textbook: Chapter 5
Study Q1: Discuss the role prototype formation may play in symmetry preferences [suggested reading: Jansson et al., 2002]
Study Q2: Discuss the extent to which individual differences in symmetry preferences are problematic for perceptual bias account [suggested reading: Little et al., 2001]

Lecture 4. Theories of universal face preferences II: Evolutionary advantage view

By contrast with the perceptual bias view, this lecture introduces the evolutionary advantage view of preferences for symmetric faces. This view posits that facial symmetry signals qualities such as health that are desirable in mates. Evidence that symmetry preferences are relatively specific to mate choice relevant stimuli (i.e. faces) rather than other objects (e.g. inverted faces) will be discussed. Evidence that symmetric individuals also possess attractive voices and body odours will also be discussed as evidence that symmetry predicts attractiveness in multiple modalities (implying symmetry signals an underlying attractive quality).
Recommended reading: Little and Jones (2003), Thornhill and Gangestad (1999), Jones (Thesis Ch. 2)

Study Q1: Discuss how the effect of face inversion on symmetry preferences supports the evolutionary advantage view [suggested reading: Little and Jones, 2003]
Study Q2: Discuss the role of correlates of symmetry in attractiveness [suggested reading: Hughes et al., 2002; Rikowski and Grammer, 1999]
Study Q3: Discuss evidence that facial symmetry signals health [suggested reading: Rhodes et al., 2002]

**Lecture 5. Does attractiveness signal health?**

The evolutionary advantage view of face preferences posits that attractiveness signals qualities that are important for mate choice (e.g. health, fertility). This lecture will discuss the evidence for and against this claim.

Recommended reading: Kalick et al. (1998), Roberts et al. (2005)

Study Q1: Discuss evidence that attractive facial characteristics signal long-term health [suggested reading: Kalick et al., 1998; Roberts et al., 2005]
Study Q2: Discuss evidence that facial attractiveness signals fertility [suggested reading: Roberts et al., 2004]

**Lecture 6. Averageness and attractiveness**

This lecture will discuss the effect of averageness on facial attractiveness and how these effects relate to the evolutionary advantage and perceptual bias views of face preferences. Although average faces are attractive, evidence that highly attractive faces deviate from average will also be discussed.

Recommended reading: Rhodes et al. (1999), Perrett et al. (1994)
Textbook: Chapter 2
Study Q1: Discuss the role prototype formation may play in preferences for attractive faces [suggested reading: Halberstadt and Rhodes, 2000]
Study Q2: Discuss the evidence that facial averageness signals health [suggested reading: Rhodes et al., 1999]
Study Q3: Discuss evidence that “average faces are attractive, but highly attractive faces are not average” [suggested reading: Perrett et al., 1994]
Study Q4: Discuss computer graphic methods used to manufacture average faces [suggested reading: Tiddeman et al., 2001]

**Lecture 7. Sexual dimorphism and attractiveness**

Although average faces are typically attractive, highly attractive faces appear to deviate from an average shape. Increasing feminine characteristics in both male and female faces increases their attractiveness (but moves the face shape away from average). This lecture will discuss the effects of sexual dimorphism on facial attractiveness and how these relate to the evolutionary advantage and perceptual bias views of face preferences. The role of personality attributions in femininity preferences will also be discussed.

Recommended reading: Perrett et al. (1998)
Textbook: Chapter 3
Study Q1: Discuss computer graphic methods used to manipulate sexual dimorphism in faces [suggested reading: Tiddeman et al., 2001]
Study Q2: Discuss the role of personality attributions in femininity preferences [suggested reading: Perrett et al., 1998]
Study Q3: Discuss evidence that facial masculinity in men signals long-term health [suggested reading: Rhodes et al., 2003]

Lecture 8. Menstrual cycle and face preferences

Perhaps the strongest evidence for the evolutionary advantage view of face preferences has come from the effects of changes in hormonal profile on women’s face preferences. This lecture will discuss the effects of menstrual cycle phase on women’s preferences for masculinity-femininity in male faces and the effects of menstrual cycle phase, pregnancy and oral contraceptive use on women’s aversion to faces displaying cues associated with illness.

Recommended reading: Penton-Voak et al. (1999), Jones et al. (2005)
Textbook: Chapter 3

Study Q1: Discuss the effect of menstrual cycle phase on women’s preferences for masculine male faces in terms of a ‘trade off’ between the hypothetical benefits of choosing a masculine or feminine mate [suggested reading: Penton-Voak et al., 1999]
Study Q2: Discuss the effects of menstrual cycle phase, oral contraceptive use and pregnancy on aversion to faces possessing cues associated with illness (e.g. pallor) [suggested reading: Jones et al., 2005]
Study Q3: Discuss the possible role of stereotype access in cyclic shifts [suggested reading: Macrae et al., 2002]

Lecture 9. Condition dependent face preferences

The previous lecture introduced individual differences in face preferences that occur as a consequence of change in hormonal profile. This lecture discusses the effect of own physical condition on women’s face preferences and outlines analogous findings in other species.

Recommended reading: Penton-Voak et al. (2003), Jones et al. (2005)
Textbook: Chapter 3

Study Q1: Discuss the effects of own attractiveness on preferences for apparent health and masculinity in face preferences [suggested reading: Penton-Voak et al. (2003), Jones et al. (2005)]
Study Q2: Discuss condition dependent preferences in female stickleback [suggested reading: Bakker et al., 1999]

Lecture 10. Kinship cues and facial attractiveness

Another source of individual differences in face preferences is self-similarity (a cue to kinship). This lecture discusses the effect of self-resemblance on face preferences, attributions of other traits and actual behaviour. The effect of menstrual cycle phase on self-similarity preferences is also discussed.
Recommended reading: DeBruine (2004, 2005a)  
See also Lisa DeBruine’s webpage (http://www.debruine.info)

Study Q1: Discuss evidence that resemblance to self increases attributions of trustworthiness and trusting behaviour [suggested reading: DeBruine, 2002, 2005a]  
Study Q2: Discuss effect of menstrual cycle phase on preferences for self-resemblance in faces [suggested reading: DeBruine et al., 2005b]

**Lecture 11. Neuroimaging and face preferences**

This lecture will discuss the neural substrates associated with viewing faces of different kinds and the implications of these findings for our understanding of how we form avoid and approach social responses.

Recommended reading: Kampe et al. (2001)

Study Q1: Discuss evidence that viewing attractive faces is associated with reward [suggested reading: Aharon et al., 2001; O’Doherty et al. 2003]  
Study Q2: Discuss evidence that disgust expression activate avoid responses [suggested reading: Phillips et al., 1997]

**Lecture 12. Summary of course**

This lecture will summarize the key themes of the course (TBA).

**Assessment**

This will be in the form of a 90 minute exam where you will have to answer 2 from a choice of 6 questions (2 sections – you must answer 1 question from each section)

Sample exam questions are given on the course website