

## FACE VALUES

A review of *In Your Face – The New Science of Human Attraction* by David Perrett. Palgrave Macmillan Press (2010), 272 pages, £14.99 (\$55.00), ISBN: 0230201296 (hardback).

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What information, if any, do our faces signal about our genetic quality, developmental history and personality? Most of us walk past hundreds or even thousands of faces every day. Why do most 'plain Janes' fail to register, while others cause gazes to linger and hearts to flutter? Are there universal rules of attraction, or is beauty always in the eye of the beholder? David Perrett, who has been at the forefront of research on the human face in recent decades, sets out to answer these questions in this comprehensive and accessible review of the ever-expanding evolutionary psychology of attraction.

In recent years, there have been a number of academic reviews attempting to establish a unified theory of human facial attraction (Rhodes, 2006; Gangestad & Scheyd, 2005), drawing from the considerable amount of research done in this field. 'In Your Face' attempts, and largely succeeds, in straddling the perilous line between an academic and a popular science approach to the theme, engaging with a wider audience while still maintaining a rigorous scientific edge. The three main traits of facial attractiveness that most research has focused on are symmetry, averageness and sexual dimorphism (masculinity in men and femininity in women) and this book describes them in detail, analysing the evidence for the relationship between these traits with health, personality and mate preferences.

The book succeeds in being an engaging and stimulating read, fluent and jargon-free. However, the critical treatment of hypotheses is notably uneven. For example, the analysis of the relationship between health and facially attractive traits is excellent, presenting a sceptical eye on the many weakly supported claims linking attractiveness to mate quality traits. Unfortunately, the same demanding critical analysis is somewhat missing from other parts of the book; too often studies cited have very small sample sizes (e.g. 26 women in Feinberg et al, 2006) and insufficient scrutiny for the claims made. Nevertheless, the book stays mostly clear from the most outlandish claims (e.g. men with symmetric fingers have better sperm (Manning et al, 1998)) arising from this field of study and is cautious with the tendency to over generalise human preferences. Furthermore, throughout the book there is a commendable effort to focus on the variability and conditionality of attractive preferences and the levels of plasticity that are to be expected from human behaviour.

Perrett also refrains from using “just so” stories, trying to shoehorn an evolutionary reason for findings that provide little indication of their evolutionary origin. This is a laudable effort that avoids a well known pitfall of some of evolutionary psychology writings, but conversely, at times, it would be interesting for the non-specialist readers to have more imaginative extrapolations on why, for instance, women prefer to look at attractive faces of both sexes and men tend to prefer to only look at attractive women’s faces.

The book provides a broad outlook on the current state of research on facial attractiveness and it does not shy away from pointing out the inconsistencies and unresolved issues that still are present in this field, with special focus on masculinity and averageness. Research on facial masculinity has yet to provide a clear picture of whether this is, in fact, a preferred trait or not. The female preference towards men with more masculine traits during their fertile period exemplifies the likely trade-off between the advantages of masculine traits and associated higher levels of testosterone (improved health) with the disadvantages (lower levels of parental investment and increased likelihood of desertion). A chapter on sex hormones correctly highlights the likely conditional nature of masculinity preferences and avoids wide generalisations, but seems to be overly reliant on studies where women’s ovulatory phase is determined from asking women when their last period was, instead of the more accurate method of hormonal testing, with the former known to produce inconsistent results (Martinez, 1997). Patchy literature is perhaps to be expected from a nascent field of science such as facial attraction but some of these findings should be taken with a pinch of salt.

While the inconsistency of findings on masculinity is well established, the critique on averageness, on the other hand, is more unexpected considering the relative agreement among most researchers on the role of averageness. Perrett’s analysis does make some valid points on current thinking - such as the fact that unusual faces are often considered the most attractive (DeBruine et al, 2007) - and he and his team clearly have spent many research hours investigating the role of averageness, but in this section the book loses some momentum with too much emphasis on the minutiae of averageness research

The book is at its most engaging when contextualising facial attractiveness into a wider body of research. The chapter on the ultimate causes of beauty is a good example of this, drawing in findings from animal studies to establish the evolutionary framework behind facial attractiveness and explaining concepts such the handicap principle, runaway processes and the ‘sexy son’ hypothesis. In this chapter it is also highlighted how some of the key assumptions of human attractiveness research - selection and heritability - have so far been devoted sparse attention by the facial attractiveness research community. The heritability of facial attractiveness has barely been investigated, and notably the only study specifically looking at this failed to find a correlation between fathers’ and sons’ attractiveness (Cornwell & Perrett, 2008). The link between reproductive success and facial attractiveness has also not been well established, with few studies investigating this relationship and with contradictory results being found. Ultimately, this exemplifies that while we may be

getting close to knowing what makes a face attractive, we are still at the early stages of understanding how and why we prefer attractive faces.

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