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Almost every woman thinks she's "hotter" than the average: Differences in self-assessments of physical attractiveness between women and men

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Abstract

"Better than average" (BTA) effect is a tendency of people to evaluate themselves more positively than they evaluate others. The goal of this study was to examine if women and men show differences in BTA effect when self-assessing their own physical attractiveness (PA), compared to other hypothetical people as a standard. A sample of 444 participants (52.5% women), of the mean age of 26.85 years, rated their own PA on a 10-point scale using a hypothetical average person of the same gender and age as a reference point. Compared to a theoretical mean of 5.5, both genders rated themselves significantly higher than the average. Thus, both women and men exhibit BTA when self-assessing their own PA. In other words, they (arguably) overrate it, but the effect is stronger for women. A random woman, compared to a random man, is 63% more likely to rate her looks higher and will consider herself as being more attractive compared to a (hypothetical) average woman in 94% of cases (compared to a probability of 78% for men). This gender difference in BTA effect can only partially be explained by higher levels of satisfaction with life, physical activity, Extraversion, and Openness to Experience.

Keywords: better than average effect (BTA), physical attractiveness, gender differences, Big 5 personality

Introduction

People are often unrealistic in self-assessments, as we tend to rate ourselves more positively than we rate others (Alicke, 1985; Brown, 1986, 2012; Zell & Alicke, 2011). This is known as a "better than average" (BTA) effect. According to cognitive theories, the BTA effect arises from egocentrism (i.e., usage of information about self, rather than the average person, when self-evaluating abilities and traits) and focalism (i.e., focusing on specific, initially selected information, without considering other relevant information) (Chambers & Windschitl, 2004). According to motivational theories, BTA effect evokes positive emotions and has self-protective functions (Kim, Kwon, & Chiu, 2017).

BTA effect appears whenever important attributes are evaluated (Brown, 2012). Physical attractiveness (PA) is one of such attributes, partially because of the widespread "what is beautiful is good" stereotype and important social benefits that it entails (Dion, Berscheid, & Walster, 1972; Little, Jones, & DeBruine, 2011; Tartaglia & Rollero, 2015). PA also has an evolutionary function as a cue for mate quality and

reproductive value (Gangestad & Scheyd, 2005; Rhodes, 2006).

The aim of this study was to examine if women and men show BTA effect when subjectively rating their own PA, compared to other hypothetical people of their gender and age, using a colloquially popular 1–10 PA measure. We also wanted to determine gender differences in this effect.

Because of the obvious importance of PA, we expect the BTA effect to be present in both genders, but due to greater emphasis on female attractiveness in human species (Gottschall, 2007) and beauty is a primary tool of human female intrasexual competition (Campbell, 2004), we would expect stronger BTA PA effect in women. This is not to say that women have more positive attitudes towards their bodies (e.g., Franzoi & Herzog, 1987; Swami et al., 2010). Rather, due to differences in evolutionary pressures and the fact that women are typically being judged more by potential partners based on the looks, while men are more judged by their status (Li et al., 2013), we would expect women to overrate their PA when compared to the average, assuming that they are subjectively conceiving what the average is.

To ensure that potential differences are not due to other factors, such as the level of physical activity or generally positive (e.g., high Extraversion or general satisfaction with life) or negative affective dispositions or states (e.g., high Neuroticism or depressiveness), we also controlled for several individual difference variables.

Method

Sample and measures

A convenience general sample of 444 participants (52.5% women; 42.3% students) of the mean age of 26.85 ($SD = 7.52$) years was recruited via an anonymous online survey. Participants rated their own PA on a 10-point scale using a hypothetical average person of the same gender and age as a reference point, i.e.: "On a 1 to 10 scale, where 1 is very low physical attractiveness and 10 is very high physical attractiveness, where do you rate your physical attractiveness in comparison to other people of your age and gender?" This 10-point rating system was used due to its arguably "colloquial popularity".

Participants rated their level of physical activity on a 5-point scale, ranging from “0 = sedentary” to “4 = very high activity”.

Participants also completed: BFI-44 measure of the Big 5 personality traits (John, Donahue, & Kentle, 1991), PHQ-9 measure of depressiveness (Kroenke & Spitzer, 2002; Kroenke, Spitzer, & Williams, 2001; see also: Subotić, 2015), and the SWLS measure of satisfaction with life (Diener, Emmons, Larsen, & Griffin, 1985).

Results

If we assume normally distributed PA in population and an absence of the BTA effect, the PA self-assessments for a random general sample should cluster around a theoretical mean of 5.5. However, established mean rating score was 6.43 ($SD = 1.70$; 26.4% of 7's, with 67.9% of 6+) for men and 7.18 ($SD = 1.56$; 31.8% of 8's, with 84.1% of 6+) for women. Only 3.4% of women and 12.8% of men rated themselves as 4 or less. Both gender means were significantly higher ($ps < .001$) than a theoretical mean of 5.5, with large effect sizes, especially for women: $t(232) = 16.47$, $d = 2.16$; men: $t(210) = 7.89$, $d = 1.09$. The score distributions are shown in Figures 1 and 2.

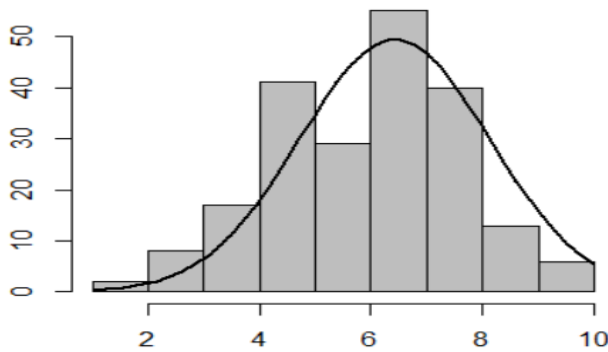


Figure 1: Self-assessed PA scores of men.

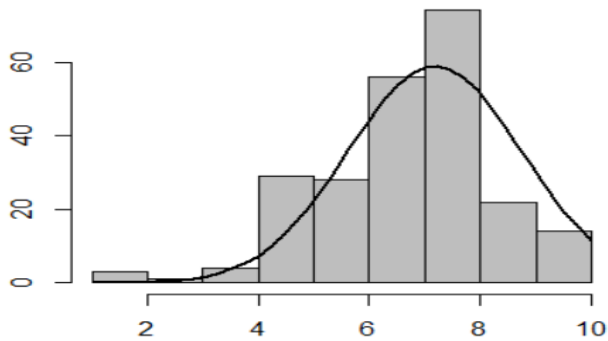


Figure 1: Self-assessed PA scores of women.

Self-assessments made by women were significantly higher than self-assessments made by men, with the effect size of a difference being slightly below the medium intensity: $t(426.54) = 4.84$, $p < .001$, $d = 0.46$.

To test if gender differences in PA ratings are due to personality factors, levels of physical activity, or age, we first

determined that they explain 24.2% of the PA variance (Table 1). After these variables were controlled for (via residualization prior to t -test), the gender difference in PA ratings persisted, but the effect size diminished: $t(439.34) = 3.15$, $p = .002$, $d = 0.30$.

Table 1: Prediction of the PA ratings.

Predictors	β	p
Big 5 traits		
Neuroticism	.001	.992
Extraversion*	.143	.005
Agreeableness	.067	.206
Conscientiousness	.040	.491
Openness to Experience*	.133	.008
Satisfaction with life*	.233	.000
Depressiveness	-.004	.932
Physical activity*	.171	.000
Age	-.015	.732

Note: * Significant predictors.

Discussion

The results indicate that the BTA effect exists when people rate their own PA using a 1-10 scale, compared to other hypothetical average people of the same gender and age. As expected, both genders show this effect, but women show it more. In other words, if the sample was not comprised of supermodels (and we are fairly certain that it was not), it is safe to state that both women and men overrate their own PA, but women are more likely to do it. Based on the effect sizes, we can calculate (McGraw & Wong, 1992) that a random woman is 63% more likely to rate her looks higher compared to a random man. A random woman will also consider herself as being better looking than a hypothetical average woman in 94% of cases, compared to 78% cases in which a random man will consider himself as being more attractive than the hypothetical average man.

Participants with higher levels of satisfaction with life, physical activity, Extraversion, and Openness to Experience are more likely to rate their own PA higher. However, these variables can only partially explain gender differences in the BTA effect, as even after they are accounted for, women will still “exaggerate” their looks more than men (roughly 58% more likely, down from 63%). It does not matter how old, physically active, (dis)satisfied with life, prone to negative affect, or depressed they are – women will rate their looks higher than the average more often (and more intense) compared to men.

Being physically attractive is arguably more important for women. Both evolutionary pressure and social norms (Burton, Netemeyer, & Lichtenstein, 1994; Campbell, 2004; Gottschall, 2007; Li et al., 2013) create different expectations concerning PA, as male role is traditionally associated with providing resources, while the female role is more tied with

the attractiveness, which is also a social currency, i.e., a source of social power and status.

Besides the obvious need to replicate the findings, several things should be done in further studies. It should be explored if a tendency to disregard the lower half of the PA numerical scale (here: 10-point) is also present in scales with different numbers of numerical points (e.g., 5-point). Furthermore, instead of allowing the participants to simply imagine what the average PA is, hypothetical "standards of average" could be experimentally primed and perhaps cross-referenced with the participants' (objective) body measures, in order to determine under which relative conditions the BTA effect occurs and when gender differences manifest the most.

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