No Need For The Blindfold: The Influence of Perpetrator Attractiveness on Legal Decision-Making

Justin W. Martin, Michael T. Treadway, Joshua W. Buckholtz, Rene Marois
Department of Psychology, Vanderbilt University, Nashville TN

Background
• While legal judgment among peers is a cornerstone of our legal system, the affective influences on legal decisions are poorly understood.
• A number of studies have reported inconsistent effects of attractiveness on legal judgment, often looking at only one specific type of crime.
• The present study investigated the role that attractiveness plays in legal decision-making through the use of facial images. Participants made punishment ratings while viewing vignettes paired with female images varying on attractiveness.

Procedure
• 34 participants (12 male) read vignettes paired with a facial image and rated punishment for a female perpetrator on a 0-9 scale (see Figure 1). Scenarios and images were matched together on a pseudo-random basis. Orders were different for each participant.
• Participants returned one week later and rated attractiveness for each image alone, also on a scale of 0-9 (see Figure 2).

Method
• 90 written scenarios were modified from current and published studies. Each scenario depicted the actions of a female perpetrator and the harming of a victim, with a varying level of crime severity and intentionality of the part of the protagonist (see Table 1).
• 277 images were taken from the FERET database. 18 separate participants (4 male) rated attractiveness of each of the images (same procedure as experimental study, see Figure 2).
• The 30 scenarios with the highest average ratings comprised the Attractive group (mean: 5.37), the 30 scenarios with the lowest average ratings comprised the Unattractive group (mean: 2.21), and the 30 images with the most average attractiveness comprised the Average group (mean: 3.73).

Results
• First, we analysed the effect of intent and crime type on punishment ratings, finding a main effect of intent and crime type, as well as an interaction between the two (see Figure 3).
• We also analysed the effect of attractiveness group on attractiveness rating, finding a significant main effect, providing evidence for the successfulness of the images in manipulating attractiveness (see Figure 4).
• Examining the main effect of attractiveness on punishment, we did not find a significant main effect (see Figure 5).
• There was also no significant interaction between attractiveness and any other combination of variables, including intent, crime type or victim gender.

Discussion
• No main effect of attractiveness, or interaction with any other variable, was found, despite the fact that attractiveness was successfully manipulated and that the scenarios were successful in differentially affecting punishment.
• Taken together, these results provide good evidence against an effect of perpetrator attractiveness on punishment across multiple crime types and levels of perpetrator intentionality.
• Additionally, an unexpected main effect of victim gender was found, which requires further examination and replication.

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