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The Effects of a Relationship Status on Views of the Opposite Sex

Taylor L. Cathey⁹

It is human nature to notice those around us, and size them up by our own set of standards. This includes taking a measure of physical appearance and attractiveness. However, there are several factors that affect our perceptions of the world around us, and especially the people whom we see. Emotional states and a variety of emotions, play a strong role in dictating our behaviors and reactions (Most, Laurenceau, Graber, Belcher, & Smith, 2010). One factor that changes our human lives is the presence of romance. Intimacy, passion, and commitment are components associated with romance and relationships that take a toll on emotions and behaviors (Sternberg, 1986). The extent that these emotions alter our perceptions is essential to understanding the whole concept of love. When two people are committed to one another, do they start to view their environment differently? In the present study this question is investigated, and observed through self-report type measures. It was hypothesized that there would be a strong relation found between relationship status and ratings of the opposite sex. Individuals of different relationship statuses were given a questionnaire to disclose their relationship information and also given four photos of the opposite sex to rate on attractiveness. Their answers were then compared and analyzed in order to test the correlation a relationship status has on our visual perceptions of the opposite sex. Using an independent t-test for analysis the results showed no significance, but the descriptive data revealed interesting findings.

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The purpose of this study was to test whether or not a person's relationship status would affect how he or she views other people of the opposite sex. I thought it would be interesting to also see if there was a difference in gender, age, seriousness of the relationship, or even whether or not someone just wants to be in a relationship with another person. Physical attractiveness is important to our American society and plays a role in our everyday interactions with other people; especially interactions with those we are romantically interested in or involved with. In one study done by McNulty, Neff, and Karney (2008) found that in marital relationships where the husband is more attractive than his wife, the husband is less satisfied in his marriage. However, McNulty et al. (2008) also found in that study that there is more than one noticeable correlation between marital satisfaction, marital behavior, and physical attractiveness of the couple. These results support my thoughts in that there is a measurable relationship between social relationships and physical attractiveness because the above study has data that shows marital satisfaction is correlated with the couple's view of attractiveness of their partner.

In another study on infidelity, DeWall, Maner, Deckman, and Rouby (2011) found interesting results about observing the opposite sex when in a relationship. They found that when people in a relationship consciously limit their attention given to individuals of the opposite sex that they are not dating, then these people want those other individuals more despite having a partner. These results are different than what would be expected, but shows that relationship quality is better when both partners are still aware and attentive to others of the opposite sex (DeWall et al., 2011). Since research shows that being attentive to the opposite sex strengthens the relationship, then it is questionable as to why this is. Based on the above results, I believe that individuals that observe other people of the opposite sex while in a relationship are allowing themselves freedom, but with this freedom these individuals that observe people other

than their partners will not view the others they observe as attractive as their relationship partner. If the individuals do view them as more attractive or equally attractive to their partner, then it would not make sense that their relationship satisfaction would either go up or remain at a high level.

Another group of researchers made some intriguing discoveries about the effects of a relationship on males. McIntyre, et al. (2006) tested the testosterone levels of males in a relationship and males not in a relationship. They found that men in a relationship tend to have lower levels of testosterone, and men not in a relationship had higher levels of testosterone. The interesting finding in their study was that men in a relationship that were still looking at other women as potential mates still had higher testosterone levels than those men who were satisfied in their relationships. The researchers accredited the drop in testosterone levels for men in a relationship to the fact that they were no longer in competition for a mate (McIntyre et al., 2006). These results support the idea that being in a relationship does affect how men view the opposite sex, and that there is even a bodily change in the men to reflect the effect.

In addition, Most et al. (2010) made findings dealing with emotional effects on visual perception. The study they done consisted of having females rate landscape pictures, and then had them rate more landscapes after being told that their male counterparts were rating pictures of other females. The women in this study rated the first set of landscapes much higher than the second set of landscapes. These results show that emotions play a part in visual perception, and particularly that jealousy has a strong effect on visual perception (Most et al, 2010). The findings these researchers made support the idea that human emotions effect our visual perceptions, and that the stronger emotions such as jealousy or love could have stronger effects.

One insightful study that I reviewed considers three components to a relationship that in different combinations make up different types of relationships (Sternberg, 1986). Sternberg's idea of romantic love is the combination of the passion component (that is responsible for physical attractiveness and the participation in sexual activities) and the intimacy component (that is responsible for feelings of closeness and attachment), and it lacks the commitment component (that is responsible for making a decision to love the person and/or continuing to love that person) (Sternberg, 1986). Consummate love is the combination of all three components: intimacy, passion, and commitment (Sternberg, 1986). These two types of love are the basis of this study, and I used a combination of the two definitions to clarify my use of the phrase 'in a relationship', which is when two people are acknowledging their common interest for one another and acting upon that interest in a relationship

Based on the research I found and reviewed, I hypothesized that men and women who were romantically involved with someone would rate others of the opposite sex lower in attractiveness than men and women who were not romantically involved with anyone. To test my hypothesis I created a stimulus containing set photos of men and a stimulus containing set photos of women, and had each participant in my study rate the photos opposite of those of his or her own sex. Each participant was then given a demographic survey that gathered information from him/her concerning his/her relationship status so that it was possible to test for correlations between relationship status and views of the opposite sex.

Method

Participants

For my research I used a convenience sample by recruiting participants from the Lindenwood Participant Pool (LPP). The LPP is comprised of students that are currently taking

an introductory class in Behavioral Science, Exercise Science, or Athletic Training. I advertised my project by placing a description sheet (see Appendix A) and a sign-up sheet with a range of times for those who were interested on the LPP's board. Next to the time slots on the sign-up sheet is the room where the research will be held during that time so that participants knew where to go. Each participant received credit for his or her class through the LPP by partaking in my study. In my study there were 16 men, 35 women, and ranged from ages 18-44 years. Also in my study, 37.2% of my participants were in a category that stated they were in a relationship, 52.9% were single, and 11.7% were in a category stating the relationship was not clearly defined or was complicated.

Materials

The study began with creating a demographic questionnaire (see Appendix B) and two stimulus sheets (see Appendices C and D) that consisted of four men and four women. The questionnaire is made up of questions deemed important to understanding my research results, and most importantly questions that enable differentiation between single participants and participants who are in a relationship. A stimulus for male participants and a stimulus for female participants were then created. Four photos of each sex were carefully chosen for the stimuli. The photos are of actors/actresses, varying in looks, and from an assortment of media genres. Famous people were chosen so that participants would not feel guilty for their ratings and could feel comfortable that the people they are rating are not local. There is the realization that this may persuade them to rate higher or lower because of the characters these actors and actresses play, but the study is aiming to see if relationship status as an effect on how one sees others of the opposite sex. That includes their personality.

Next there was the creation of a sheet for participants to rate the photos on (see Appendix E). In order to have a setting to conduct research, rooms had to be booked through the LPP. These rooms were either classrooms or small rooms off a bigger room called the Psychology Lab. All the rooms were on campus and centrally located for all participants, and contained a couple chairs and a table for the participants to sit at while participating in the study. Next an informed consent (see Appendix F) form was created for each participant to sign before continuing with my research study. This consent form explained to the participant what the study was about, what they would be asked to do, and that if at any time they become uncomfortable then they could stop and still receive credit for their class.

After this, a feedback letter was created (see Appendix G) to be given to each participant after they completed the study that explains the purpose of my study, what would be done with their results, and that if they wish to know the results of the study as a whole (not their own personal results) they may contact me. The final step of my preparation was to print out sign in sheets and participant receipts and fill them out. All of the papers were also paired together (one stimuli and one questionnaire) with an ID number at the top of each set of papers. This was done to keep confidentiality while still being able to identify a subject with their results, and so that when participants came in the study was completely prepared.

Procedure

Each participant signed in as they came in to the room. Next, each participant was given two consent forms to read over and sign (one copy for him/her and one copy for my records). Then each participant was given the rating sheet and shown the stimuli containing photos opposite of his/her own sex. The sex of each participant was determined by physical judgment when he/she entered the room. There were no participants that showed ambiguity in sex,

therefore sex was easily observed. Then he/she was asked to fill out the rating sheet. At this point, each participant was given a demographic questionnaire to fill out. Lastly, each participant was given a feedback letter to debrief him/her and his/her participant receipt needed to receive extra credit for his/her class.

Results

It was predicted that participants in a relationship would rate the opposite sex lower than participants that were single. A dependent variable of ratings of the opposite sex was tested in relation to the independent variable of relationship status. The findings of this study did not produce significant results when an individual t-test analysis was ran using a two-tailed test with a significance level of .05, $t(44)=1.245$, $p > .05$. Only two groups were used in this analysis: all the single categories in one group and all the relationship categories in another group. The single categories included participants that answered that they were single, and the participants that answered that they were married, engaged, in a relationship, or just in a relationship were all categories included in the relationship category. Therefore, the results from the five participants involved in inconclusive relationships were not included in the above analysis. The categories were condensed in order to have more significant numbers in each category when running the t-test. However, it is important to mention that differences were found between the different relationship statuses. The mean rating of the photos done by the categories pertaining to being single was at or above 30 ($M > 30$) with a standard deviation of 4.9, and the mean rating of the photos done by the categories pertaining to being in a relationship was below 30 ($M < 30$) with a standard deviation of 6.4. It is evident that there is a divide in the two groups, but not a significant divide.

One extraordinary finding was that the mean rating for individuals that were engaged was 18, and the next lowest rating was the married group at a mean of 27. Although it does make sense that these two groups would have the lowest ratings of the photos because they are considered to be in the more committed relationships, it is peculiar that the engaged group was the lowest rating group and that it was 9 points below the next group. In conclusion, I reject my hypothesis due to the insignificant results of the independent t-test.

Discussion

The present study that relationship status does not have a significant effect on how individuals view the opposite sex. However, the notable gap between the ratings by people who are single and those who are not suggest that there is some aspect that plays a small role in this phenomenon. In a study done by Most et al. (2010), the researchers found that social emotions and especially emotions found within a romantic relationship have an effect on visual perception. Furthermore, they found that these emotions could go as far as altering visual perception. The results of my study both support and dispute their finding, depending on the analysis used. Descriptive statistics would show the sizable gaps between ratings of people who are single and those people who are in a variety of different types of relationships. However, other statistical analysis like the t-test would not show significance and would not give rise to the gaps that are present in other analysis.

Future studies done should consider a few details that would improve the study overall. In my study there was one instance when a couple came in to take the study together, and the two of them were sitting across a table from one another. Throughout the entire procedure, each one was looking at the other one's answers and making comments that could have swayed each of

them to not answer honestly. If this study were done again it would be beneficial to test each participant separately to avoid a bias in answers.

In addition, during my study there was one participant that felt guilty for rating a photo of a woman that looked similar to myself rather low, and apologized to me several times. To avoid this situation it would be useful to have two researchers, one of each gender, and have the male researcher conduct research with male participants and the female researcher conduct research with female participants. Another solution would be to have a computer-based test in order to avoid all researcher bias and social expectation bias.

A last thought to consider is that there could be other emotional factors involved with a person's relationship playing a role in these results, and it would be useful to test for these other factors with self-report type measure. For example, individuals that are secure in their relationship could have different results than those who are insecure in their own relationships. Jealousy is a strong emotion that effects our visual perceptions, and therefore these intense emotions have a big role in a study like mine (Most et al., 2010). It is not possible to separate these variables from a participant, but it is possible to test for these variables. Future studies should at minimum test to see if such variables are present.

There were limitations in my study that could have had an effect on my results. My participant recruitment was limited to a select group of college students that are in certain classes. These participants would not be considered a representative sample of the worldwide population, and therefore could have skewed the results. Every culture in our world has some concept of marriage and committed relationship, and therefore there is not an individual in the world that would not be considered as part of the target population. In addition, the group of participants involved in my study were all in a younger age category, and therefore only a few

were married. Marriage is considered to be the most significant form of commitment for a relationship in American culture, and at this stage the couple's relationship is most likely considered serious. Therefore my study does not include a notable amount of data from individuals at a serious stage in their relationship.

Lastly, my study was limited because of the number of photos I had each participant to rate. By only using four photos it was impossible to include all body types, ethnicities, and other features deemed as essential when evaluating physical appearance. Future studies would gain from using numerous pictures that represent the whole population. Overall, my study displayed valuable insight and a good starting point for future studies to build upon.

References

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Appendix A

Recruitment Description

In this study, you will be asked to complete two short tasks. First, you will be shown four photos of the opposite sex and asked to rate them based on an attractiveness scale. Second, you will be asked to reveal a few simple demographic pieces of information about yourself and your relationship status. The entire procedure should take no more than 15 minutes of your time.

Appendix B

Demographic Questionnaire

SUBJECT ID NUMBER: _____

- 1) Are you MALE FEMALE?

- 2) How old are you? ____ years

- 3) Are you currently committed to a romantically exclusive relationship? YES or NO

- 4) If you are currently in a relationship please rate how committed you believe your relationship to be. (1 is we just started dating, 2 is we are dating and I do not know where this will lead yet, 3 is we have discussed the future and possibilities, 4 is we have plans and ideas for our future, and 5 is we know there is no one else out there for us and have plans to spend a life together)

1 2 3 4 5

- 5) If you are currently single, is there someone in your life that you are interested in starting relationship with?

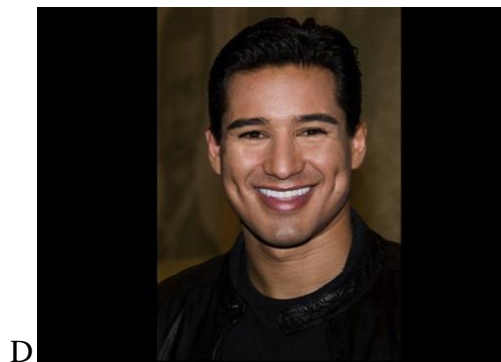
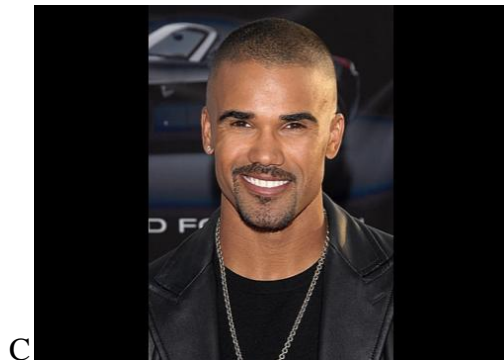
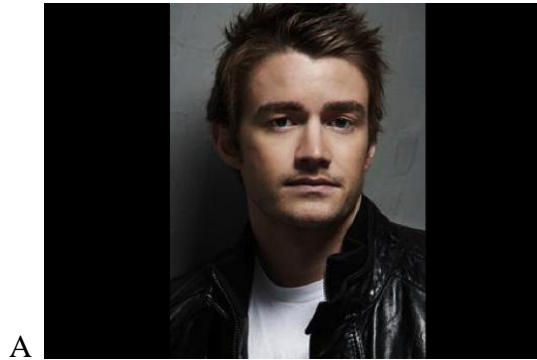
YES or NO

- 6) What would you consider your relationship status to be?

____ Married
____ Engaged
____ In a relationship
____ Just entered a relationship
____ Not yet in a relationship, but could be soon
____ On a break from a relationship
____ Single
____ Other

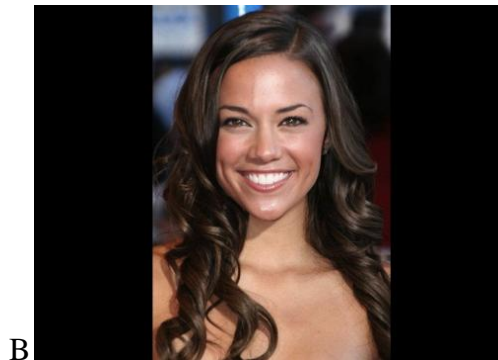
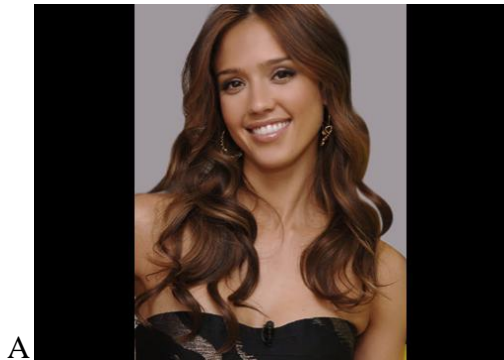
Appendix C

Female Stimuli



Appendix D

Male Stimuli



Appendix E

Rating Sheet

SUBJECT ID NUMBER: _____

Rate each person on a scale from 1 to 10; 1 being not attractive and 10 being very attractive.
Please circle your answers neatly.

Person A-

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Person B-

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Person C-

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Person D-

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Appendix F

Informed Consent

I, _____ (print name), understand that I will be taking part in a research project that requires me to complete one short task and one brief survey: 1) one which will require me to rate four pictures of the opposite sex based on attractiveness, and 2) one which requires me to provide simple demographic information about myself and my relationship status. I understand that I should be able to complete this project within 15 minutes. I am aware that I am free to skip any questions in the unlikely event that I feel uncomfortable answering any of the items on the demographic survey or become uncomfortable rating the four photos of the opposite sex. I am also aware that my participation in this study is strictly voluntary and that I may choose to withdraw from the study at any time without any penalty or prejudice. I also understand that I will still receive my extra credit if I feel the need to withdraw from the study. I understand that the information obtained from my responses will be analyzed only as part of aggregate data and that all identifying information will be absent from the data in order to ensure anonymity. I also understand that the photos I will be rating are pictures of people off campus, and will not learn of my own personal ratings of their attractiveness. I am also aware that my responses will be kept confidential and that data obtained from this study will only be available for research and educational purposes. I understand that any questions I may have regarding this study shall be answered by the researcher involved to my satisfaction. Finally, I verify that I am at least 18 years of age and am legally able to give consent or that I am under the age of 18 but have on file with the LPP office, a completed parental consent form that allows me to give consent as a minor.

_____ Date: _____

(Signature of participant)

_____ Date: _____

(Signature of researcher obtaining consent)

Student Researcher Name and Contact Info:

Taylor Cathey tlc284@lionmail.lindenwood.edu

Supervisor: Dr. Michiko Nohara-LeClair

Mnohara-leclair@lindenwood.edu

Appendix G

Feedback Letter

Feedback Letter

Thank you for participating in my study. The present study was conducted in order to determine whether relationship status affects how one views the opposite sex. I hypothesized that men and women in a relationship would rate the pictures shown of the opposite sex lower on attractiveness than men and women that are not in a relationship.

Please note that I am not interested in your individual results; rather, I am only interested in the overall findings based on aggregate data. I also want to ensure ALL participants that your participation was helpful no matter your current relationship status because I need participants of all kinds of relationship statuses for my study. No identifying information about you will be associated with any of the findings, nor will it be possible for me to trace your responses on an individual basis.

If you are interested in obtaining the final results of this study based on aggregate data, or if you have any questions or concerns regarding any portion of this study, please do not hesitate to let me know now or in the future. My contact information is found at the bottom of this letter.

Thank you again for your valuable contribution to this study.

Sincerely,

Principal Investigator:

Taylor Cathey tlc284@lionmail.lindenwood.edu

Supervisor:

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