Sensitivity to Rejection Based on Appearance Bad for Mental, Physical Health

Negative effects can be buffered by self-affirmation, close relationships

BUFFALO, N.Y. -- Three new studies by a University at Buffalo psychologist offer the first known evidence that some people anxiously expect that they will be rejected by others because of their physical appearance, and that this sensitivity, if not mitigated, has serious implications for their mental and physical health.

"Appearance-based Rejection Sensitivity: Implications for Mental and Physical Health, Affect, and Motivation" by Lora Park, Ph.D., assistant professor in the Department of Psychology, UB College of Arts and Sciences, reports on three of Park's studies and is currently in press for publication in *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*.

Park, who directs the Self and Motivation Research Laboratory at UB, describes appearance-based rejection sensitivity as a personality-processing system characterized by anxious concerns and expectations about being rejected based on one's physical attractiveness.

Her research shows that when motivation for looking attractive is rooted in anxieties about being rejected by others, the consequences can be deleterious to health and well-being. It also suggests that there may be ways to mitigate these negative effects, by having people think of their strengths or their close relationships with others.

In the first study, Park developed and validated an appearance-based rejection sensitivity scale (ARS scale) with 242 college students, to measure the extent to which people anxiously expected rejection from others based on their physical attractiveness. She found that those who scored high in appearance-based rejection sensitivity were likely to have low self-esteem, high levels of neuroticism, insecure attachment styles, to base their self-worth on their appearance and to rate themselves as physically unattractive.

The study also showed that people who are highly sensitive to appearance-based rejection reported increased symptoms of disordered eating.

"Both men and women who reported being sensitive to appearance-based rejection were preoccupied with their body and weight in unhealthy ways. They avoided eating when they were hungry, exercised compulsively and engaged in binging and purging," says Park.

People with high appearance-based rejection sensitivity also were more likely than people low in appearance-based rejection sensitivity to compare their physical attractiveness with others and to feel bad about themselves when making such comparisons. These results were found regardless of the subjects' levels of self-esteem, attachment style, general sensitivity to rejection, neuroticism, self-rated level of attractiveness and the degree to which they based self-worth on appearance.

Interestingly, Park found that both appearance-based rejection sensitivity and basing self-worth on appearance independently predicted eating disorder symptoms and the tendency to make appearance-based comparisons.

"These findings suggest different pathways through which people may develop and maintain behaviors such as excessive dieting, compulsive exercising, binging and purging, and comparing one's attractiveness with others" Park says. "Some people engage in such behaviors because they are ultimately worried about being rejected by others if they don't measure up to looking a certain way," says Park.

"For others," she says, "the underlying motivation for such behaviors may be less about interpersonal anxieties and more about maintaining and enhancing personal self-esteem."

In the second study, Park found that people with high levels of appearance-based rejection sensitivity reported feeling more alone and rejected when asked to list negative aspects of their appearance than when asked to think of a neutral topic (listing objects they saw in a room). On the other hand, subjects with low levels of appearance-based rejection sensitivity were not negatively affected when listing aspects of their appearance with which they were dissatisfied.

"Simply having people list what they didn't like about their appearance, whether it was their weight, their height, having acne or some other facial or body feature, was sufficient for people high in appearance-based rejection sensitivity to feel lonely, rejected, unwanted and isolated," says Park.

If appearance-based rejection leads to negative outcomes, are there ways to attenuate these effects? Park conducted a third study to examine this possibility.

In the third study, all participants first were asked to write an essay about a negative aspect of their appearance. Next, they were randomly assigned to one of three intervention conditions: a Self-Affirmation Condition, in which they listed their greatest personal strength; a Secure Attachment Prime Condition, in which they listed the initials of a close, caring relationship partner; or a Neutral Condition, in which they listed an object they saw in the room.

Results showed that those who were sensitive to appearance-based rejection experienced lower self-esteem and more negative mood, but only when asked to think of an object in the room.

"Being reminded of an object in the room did nothing to improve people's self-esteem or mood following the appearance threat," Park says.

"However, a reminder of one's strengths or close relationships was enough to reduce the damaging effects of thinking about negative aspects of one's appearance," explains Park.

"These findings," she says, "emphasize the power of self-affirmation and of having close relationships in helping people cope with insecurities regarding their appearance."

Park's current lab research examines how threats to people's sense of physical attractiveness, a domain with relevance for both self-esteem and belongingness concerns, affects their self-feelings and motivations. Her studies also examine how the desire to satisfy self-esteem versus belongingness concerns affect symptoms of depression, disordered eating and relationship outcomes.

Park is co-the author of "Contingencies of self-worth and self-validation goals: Implications for close relationships," published in "Self and Relationships: Connecting Intrapersonal and Interpersonal Processes" (Guilford Press, 2006) by In K. D. Vohs and E. J. Finkel (Eds.), 84-103, New York, and "Seeking self-esteem: Construction, maintenance and protection of self-worth," In M. Leary and J. Tangney (Eds.), "Handbook of Self and Identity" (New York: Guilford Press, 2003).

She also has published articles in the *Psychology Bulletin* and the *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*.

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