

Can't Take My Eyes Off You: New Study Shows The Power Of Attraction

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Whether we are seeking a mate or sizing up a potential rival, good-looking people capture our attention nearly instantaneously and render us temporarily helpless to turn our eyes away from them, according to a new Florida State University study.

“It’s like magnetism at the level of visual attention,” said Jon Maner, an assistant professor of psychology at FSU, who studied the role mating-related motives can play in a psychological phenomenon called attentional adhesion. His findings are published in the September issue of the *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*.

The paper, “Can’t Take My Eyes Off You: Attentional Adhesion to Mates and Rivals,” is one of the first to show how strongly, quickly and automatically we are attuned to attractive people, he said. FSU graduate students Matthew Gailliot, D. Aaron Rouby and Saul Miller co-authored the study.

In a series of three experiments, Maner and his colleagues found that the study participants, all heterosexual men and women, fixated on highly attractive people within the first half of a second of seeing them. Single folks ogled the opposite sex, of course, but those in committed relationships also checked people out, with one major difference: They were more interested in beautiful people of the same sex.

“If we’re interested in finding a mate, our attention gets quickly and automatically stuck on attractive members of the opposite sex,” Maner

said. “If we’re jealous and worried about our partner cheating on us, attention gets quickly and automatically stuck on attractive people of our own sex because they are our competitors.”

Maner’s research is based on the idea that, through processes of biological evolution, our brains have been designed to strongly and automatically latch on to signs of physical attractiveness in others in order to both find a mate and guard him or her from potential competitors.

“These kinds of attentional biases can occur completely outside of our conscious awareness,” he said.

Biology or not, this phenomenon is fraught with potential romantic peril. For example, even some people in committed relationships had difficulty pulling their attention away from images of attractive people of the opposite sex. And fixating on images of perceived romantic rivals could contribute to feelings of insecurity.

Modern technology has enhanced these pitfalls. Although there are people of striking beauty in real life, singer Frankie Valli’s pronouncement that “you’re just too good to be true” may be the case when it comes to images in movies and magazines or on the Internet.

“It may be helpful to try to minimize our exposure to these images that have probably been ‘doctored,’” Maner said. “We should pay attention to all of the regular-looking people out in the world so that we have an appropriate standard of physical beauty. This is important because too much attention to ultra-attractive people can damage self-esteem as well as satisfaction with a current romantic partner.”

In the experiments, study participants -- 120 people in the first study and 160 and 162 in the second and third studies, respectively -- completed

questionnaires to determine the extent to which they were motivated to seek out members of the opposite sex. They then took part in a series of “priming” activities before they were shown photos of highly attractive men, highly attractive women, average-looking men and average-looking women.

After a photo of one of the faces flashed in one quadrant of a computer screen, the participants were required to shift their attention away from that face to somewhere else on the screen. Using a precise measure of reaction time, Maner found that it took the participants longer to shift their attention away from the photos of the highly attractive people.

Maner said he was surprised that his studies showed little differences between the sexes when it came to fixating on eye-catching people.

“Women paid just as much attention to men as men did to women,” he said. “I was also surprised that jealous men paid so much attention to attractive men. Men tend to worry more about other men being more dominant, funny or charismatic than they are. But when it comes to concerns about infidelity, men are very attentive to highly attractive guys because presumably their wives or girlfriends may be too.”

Source: FSU

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