

'Objectifying gaze' triggers conflicting outcomes for women

February 3 2011, By Steve Smith



Sarah Gervais

Something for men to think about the next time they gawk at an attractive female co-worker: That longing stare may touch off a vicious cognitive cycle that could hurt her ability to do her job well.

In a new study, researchers found that women who were subjected to an "objectifying gaze" were more severely affected by the action than men. Most notably, women performed significantly worse on [math problems](#) after being ogled -- a concern for advocates of improving women's roles in male-dominated fields of science, technology, engineering and mathematics.

But at the same time, women were still surprisingly motivated to seek out and interact with the person who looked them over, the study showed.

"The objectifying gaze may lead to a vicious cycle in which women underperform in their work, giving people the impression that their looks are more important than what they do," said Sarah Gervais, a University of Nebraska-Lincoln assistant professor of psychology and the study's lead author. "Unfortunately, this cycle may persist if women continue to interact with the people who led them to underperform in the first place."

The study involved 150 people -- 67 women and 83 men -- who were invited to take part in an interview-style exercise to examine how people work in teams. Each was assigned an interviewer of the opposite sex, who, when the participants entered the room, looked at them from head to waist and from waist to head in one sweeping motion and stared at their chests during the interview. Interviewers also gave participants written feedback at the end of the interview that said, among other things, that they were "looking good."

Participants were then given a dozen math problems, and also answered several questions to establish their feelings about their own bodies as well as their interviewer.

Researchers assumed correctly that women would have more trouble with the math problems than men in the study. Women also predictably reported more shame and dissatisfaction with their bodies than men.

But why would women then say they wanted more contact with someone who objectified them? Among the possibilities, Gervais said, is that being stared at in an objectified way can suggest to women that their appearance is valued over their other qualities. This may lead them to

feel their sense of belonging is threatened and can motivate them to do something about it. Or, she said, women may want more interaction to show the person who objectified her that she is not simply a sex object.

The research is an important first step toward documenting and explaining the immediate consequences of the objectifying gaze in actual interactions, and shows that it is particularly problematic for women.

"The results suggest that seemingly innocent overtures -- checking women out or complimenting them on their appearance -- have remarkably negative effects on [women](#)," Gervais said. "Identifying the adverse consequences of the objectifying gaze is a first step toward creating interventions that can reduce its effects."

More information: The article appears in the February edition of *Psychology of Women Quarterly* and is authored by UNL's Gervais and Jill Allen, along with Theresa Vescio of Pennsylvania State University.

Provided by University of Nebraska-Lincoln

Citation: 'Objectifying gaze' triggers conflicting outcomes for women (2011, February 3)
retrieved 25 April 2024 from
<https://medicalxpress.com/news/2011-02-objectifying-triggers-conflicting-outcomes-women.html>

<p>This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.</p>
--