Topic 3. Are attractive faces only average?

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in the 1800s Sir Francis Galton developed photographic techniques for producing composite face images

multiple face images were superimposed on a single photographic plate, with the face position standardised
I will now show a few typical portraits I selected out of 82 male portraits of a different series of consumptive male patients; they were those that had more or less of a particular wan look, that I wished to elicit. The selected cases were about 18 in number, and from those I took 12, rejecting about six as having some marked peculiarity that did not conform well with the remaining 12. The result is a very striking face, thoroughly ideal and artistic, and singularly beautiful. It is, indeed, most notable how beautiful all composites are. Individual peculiarities are all irregularities, and the composite is always regular.

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SPECIMENS OF COMPOSITE PORTRAITS
PERSONAL AND FAMILY.

HEALTH DISEASE THEFT

CONGESTION AND OTHER MALADIES
modern computer graphic techniques use similar principles

composites (‘averages’ or ‘prototypes’) made using these techniques also tend to be more attractive than the average rating given to the individual images from which they were constructed (i.e. the ‘exemplars’)

this is often referred to as the averageness effect
measuring proportions shows the averageness effect too

averageness effect is also seen in diverse cultures

averageness effect is seen for many stimuli (e.g. dogs, fish)
average face images tend to be highly symmetric

but preferences for average faces are not simply a byproduct of symmetry preferences

the averageness effect has been demonstrated with profile views and when averages were made from symmetrised face images

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the averageness hypothesis

because the averageness effect is so robust (and mapped nicely on to contemporary theories of category formation and learning), many psychologists in the 1990s suggested averageness was the key factor in facial attractiveness

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‘attractive faces are only average’

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testing the averageness hypothesis (Perrett et al. 1994)
caricatures exaggerate an individual's distinctive characteristics (often for humorous effect!)

computer graphic methods can do this by shifting the features away from the average configuration

are attractive faces the most average?

sixty faces
15 most attractive faces
'hyper' attractive face

Perrett et al. (1994)
Key points

there is good evidence that average faces tend to be somewhat attractive, leading some researchers to claim that averageness is critical for facial attractiveness

using caricaturing techniques, Perrett et al. (1994) demonstrated that very attractive faces possessed non-average traits

but what non-average traits do they have?