Topic 2. Why are symmetric faces attractive?

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original (asymmetric)  manipulated (symmetrised)

\[
\begin{array}{cc}
\text{% of symmetrised faces chosen} & \\
\text{men} & 62 \\
\text{women} & 70 \\
\end{array}
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UoA students prefer symmetric faces
why do we find symmetric faces attractive?

- perceptual bias account
- evolutionary advantage view
perceptual bias account

the wiring of our visual system means we can easily process symmetric stimuli of any kind

this bias makes symmetric stimuli seem attractive

evolutionary advantage view

symmetric characteristics signal developmental stability ('health')

we find symmetric individuals attractive because we've evolved to prefer healthy mates
testing the perceptual bias account of symmetry preferences

enhanced cortical sensitivity for symmetric patterns
we (and other species) prefer symmetric abstract art

people also tend to prefer symmetry in buildings

symmetry is preferred in decorative objects (e.g. vases)
symmetric hand axes may have had special status

**evolutionary advantage view**

Symmetric characteristics signal developmental stability (‘health’)

We find symmetric individuals attractive because we’ve evolved to prefer healthy mates

**testing the evolutionary advantage account of symmetry preferences**
symmetric male barn swallows tend to be healthier, preferred by females and father healthier offspring

symmetric peacocks also tend to be healthier, are preferred by peahens and father healthier offspring
Little et al. (2001) Women show an opposite-sex bias in sensitivity to facial symmetry

How else can you manipulate ‘mate-choice-relevance’ of faces?

Inverted faces are hard to process and tend to be perceived more like non-face objects than faces.
upright opposite-sex faces are 'mate-choice-relevant' stimuli, but inverted versions ('objects') might not be

Little & Jones (2003)
Key points

symmetric faces are attractive, even in diverse cultures

although there is some evidence for a perceptual bias account, evidence suggests that there is a mate-choice component to symmetry preferences