Health and Disability

Women’s hairstyle and men’s behavior: A field experiment

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Little research has examined the effect of women’s hairstyles on people’s behavior. In a field study, male and female passersby, walking alone in the street, were observed while walking behind a female-confederate who dropped a glove and apparently was unaware of her loss. The confederate had long dark hair arranged in three different hairstyles: one with her hair falling naturally on her shoulders and her back, one with her hair tied in a ponytail, and one with her hair twisted in a bun. Results reported that the hairstyle had no effect on female passersby’s helping behavior. However, it was found that the hairstyle influenced male passersby with men helping the confederate more readily when her hair fell naturally on her neck, shoulders and upper back.

Key words: hairstyle, women, attractiveness.

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INTRODUCTION

Although hairstyles or hair characteristics are a common striking and obvious feature of appearance, psychological research focusing on women’s hair has received little attention (Hinsz, Matz & Patience, 2001). Most of the research conducted on women’s hair has examined hair color. Several studies reported that men but not women helped a woman with blond hair more favorably (Guéguen & Lamy, 2009; Lynn, 2009; Price, 2008) suggesting that hair color is an important factor for men when judging the attractiveness of a woman.

An additional feature of hair appearance studied by scientists is hair length. Several studies have reported that women’s hair length influences how they are perceived by an observer. Using photographs of women targets with hair length varying across experimental conditions, Bereczkei and Mesko (2006) reported that males rated the woman target with long hair as more feminine, determined, intelligent, independent and healthy while the target with short hair was perceived to be more honest, caring and emotional. Terry and Krantz (1993) reported that long hair was associated with decreased social forcefulness. These results seem to contradict those reported by Bereczkei and Mesko (2006) but could be explained by cultural or period differences. More than 10 years separated the two studies and the experiment of Terry and Krantz (1993) was conducted in the United States while the experiment of Bereczkei and Mesko (2006) was conducted in Hungary. More recently, Swami, Furnham and Joshi (2008) using line drawings of female bodies reported that short hair targets were rated as significantly more fertile than long hair. The authors also reported an interaction effect between hair length and hair color: males but not females rated a blond target with short hair to be less healthy than a target with long hair, while the reverse effect was reported with a target with dark hair. With more realistic photos of women’s faces, Mesko and Bereczkei (2004) reported that long hair was associated with higher ratings of femininity, youth, health and sexiness. These effects were found both with low or high attractive targets. Again this apparent contradiction between the findings could be explained by cultural factors (Mesko and Bereczkei, 2004 for Hungary and Swami et al., 2008 for the United Kingdom) or the targets used (Swami et al., 2008 for drawings of female bodies and Mesko and Bereczkei, 2004 for real photos of women’s faces).

Based on a survey conducted in the street, Hinsz et al. (2001) reported that as women aged, their hair became shorter. The authors also reported that short hair was associated with more health problems and married women tended to have shorter hair than non-married ones. The authors concluded that women’s hair length could serve as a cue of reproductive potential for men.

Overall these studies, combined with studies reporting that hair color influences male helping behavior, support the assumption that hair is an important cue for men when judging women or interacting with them. However, one aspect that has received less interest from researchers is hairstyle. To our knowledge, only one study has examined some aspects of hairstyle. Using photos of female models, Mesko and Bereczkei (2004) reported that among women with less facial attractiveness, the hair bun is associated with greater femininity.

In the present study, the effect of hairstyle was evaluated in a field setting. First, in most of the previous research examining the effect of hair on judgment, photos and sometimes only line drawings of women’s bodies were used to present the target (Swami et al., 2008). Thus, there is a lack of research with high ecological validity. Given the fact that in real life individuals are not only exposed to faces, it appears necessary to examine the effect of hairstyle in a real situation and with a real target. Second, hair length could be considered by women as a part of their look, but most of the time with the same hair length, it is possible to arrange one’s hair to obtain a different look. Third, in the only study examining the effect of hairstyle on judgment, Mesko and Bereczkei (2004) reported an effect of hairstyle with only low attractive women’s faces, suggesting that hairstyle could interact with women’s attractiveness. Thus, it appeared necessary to conduct a study where it was not possible to evaluate the attractiveness of the target’s face. In order to study the effect of hairstyle in a situation where the participant could not see the woman’s face, a young woman confederate with long dark hair
used three hairstyles (one with her hair falling naturally on her shoulders and her back, one with a ponytail, and one with a bun) and was instructed to walk ahead of a passerby and to drop a glove on the floor while pretending to be unaware of the loss. Warning or not the confederate about her loss was the dependent variable measured. Despite the fact that some contradictory results are probably explained by methodological differences in the studies and by cultural factors, it was difficult to make a clear prediction of the results. Indeed, in this study we examined the effect of hair when the participants cannot see the face of the target while all the previous studies reported using targets presented with their face being visible. However, Mesko and Bereczkei (2004) reported with photographs of women targets with long hair increased femininity, sexiness, youth and health of the targets. Thus we hypothesized that a target who wore her hair naturally on her shoulders and her back could increase the perceived length of her hair which in turn could influence the help they could receive from men.

METHOD

Participants

The participants were 90 men and 90 women (approximately between the ages of 25 and 45) chosen at random while they were walking alone in pedestrian areas of a town (around 60-70,000 inhabitants) situated on the south coast of Brittany in France.

Procedure

A 19 year-old Caucasian woman (height 1.68 cm, weight 52 kg) served as the confederate in this study. Her hair was dark and roughly 70 centimeters long. Three hairstyle conditions were manipulated: in the first condition (natural condition), the confederate’s hair fell naturally on her neck, shoulders and upper back; in the second condition (ponytail condition) her hair was tied in a ponytail; in the third condition (bun condition), her hair was twisted in a bun. In all the conditions, the confederate wore black slacks, black shoes and a black coat (the experiment was conducted in January). The confederate selected a participant walking in her direction. The confederate was instructed to approach men or women walking alone, aged roughly between 25 and 45, the targets. Thus we hypothesized that a target who wore her hair naturally on her shoulders and her back could increase the perceived length of her hair which in turn could influence the help they could receive from men.

RESULTS

The behavior of the participant was coded using a numerical coding. If the participant did nothing and continued to walk, his/her behavior was given a score of 1. If he/she verbally warned the confederate about her loss, the behavior was given a score of 2. Finally, if the participant picked up the glove and gave it to the confederate, his/her behavior was given a score of 3. The mean of the helping scores according to the experimental condition and gender of the participant is presented in Table 1.

With the score of participants, a 3 (experimental conditions) × 2 (participants’ gender) between groups analysis of variance (ANOVA) was performed. A main effect of the experimental condition was found (F(2, 174) = 18.00, p < 0.001, η² = 0.17). The post hoc test revealed that the natural condition was statistically different from the ponytail condition (LSD test, p < 0.001) and the bun condition (LSD test, p < 0.001), whereas no statistical difference was found between the ponytail and the bun conditions (LSD test, p = 1.00). A main effect of participants’ gender was found (F(1, 174) = 24.50, p < 0.001, η² = 0.12) revealing that, overall, male pedestrians gave more help than female pedestrians. A significant interaction between pedestrians’ gender and hairstyle was reported F(2, 174) = 8.00, p < 0.001, η² = 0.08) with contrast analysis revealing that the overall effect of hairstyle on female participants appeared non significant F(2, 87) = 1.11, p = 0.33) while it appeared significant with male participants F(2, 87) = 22.66, p < 0.001). A post hoc test with male participants revealed that the natural hair condition was statistically different from the ponytail condition (LSD test, p < 0.001) and the bun condition (LSD test, p < 0.001), whereas no statistical difference was found between the ponytail and the bun conditions (LSD test, p = 1.00).

DISCUSSION

It was reported for the first time in a field setting that women’s hairstyles influence participants’ behavior. In this study, congruent with our hypothesis, we observed that male participants but not female participants were influenced by the confederate’s hairstyle. More specifically, we reported that the confederate received more help from men when her hair fell naturally on her shoulders and back compared to a situation where she had a ponytail or a bun. To our knowledge, this the first time that the effect of hairstyle was evaluated. Previous research had only examined the effect of hair length on participants’ judgment (Bereczkei & Mesko, 2006; Mesko & Bereczkei, 2004; Terry & Krantz, 1993; Swami et al., 2008) while this study only examined the way the confederate wore her hair. Of course short, medium or long length could be considered as hairstyles. However, in this study, the confederate’s hair length remained the same and only the way she arranged her hair was manipulated which, to our knowledge, is a new way to evaluate the influence of women’s hair on men. It was also found
in previous studies that hair length interacted with the attractiveness of the target (Mesko & Bereczkei, 2004) or the hair color of the target (Swami et al., 2008). In this study, given the method used, it was not possible for the participant to see the confederate’s face and the hair color remained constant. Thus, only the hairstyle was examined.

The research cited above only examined female targets presented in a single face photo or with line drawings of women’s bodies. This method decreases the ecological validity of the findings. Our experiment appears more realistic than the previous research reported given the fact that we used a female confederate in a real social situation. Moreover, these previous studies only examined the effect of hair length on the judgment of health, fertility or femininity, while in this study we examined the behavioral effect of a woman’s hairstyle on participants, thereby increasing the ecological validity of our findings.

Thus, overall our findings support the assumption that hair color or hair length are not the only factors related to women’s hair that could be examined. The way that a woman arranges her hair appears to be a new and effective method to examine the effect of hair features on human behavior. It remains to explain why men helped the confederate more readily when she wore her hair naturally on her neck, shoulders and back.

First, it could be stated that the presence of the ponytail or the bun decreased the perceived length of the confederate’s hair, which in turn explained why she received less help in these two hairstyle conditions. However, if this could explain the results reported in the bun condition, it appears less plausible in the ponytail condition. In this condition, the participant was able to see that the confederate had long hair and even if its perceived length was reduced, Mesko and Bereczkei (2004) reported that medium hair length was sufficient to increase the positive perception of a female face compared with a short hair condition. Our findings appear more congruent with those reported by Hinsz et al. (2001) who reported in a study conducted with female participants that long hair and hair quality were associated with fewer health problems, youthfulness and fertility. These authors also reported that hair length and quality were correlated. Thus, when the confederate’s long dark hair fell down over her shoulders and back, this hairstyle could have increased both the perceived length and quality of her hair. Therefore, it could be stated that displaying hair in this way could serve as a cue of reproductive potential for men.

Research has found that men across all cultures care more about physical features in potential opposite-sex mates while women care more about resource features (Buss, 1989; Kenrick, Groth, Troost & Sadalla, 1993; Shackelford, Schmitt & Buss, 2005). Past research that examined hair color reported that men but not women helped a woman with blond hair more favorably (Guéguen & Lamy, 2009; Lynn, 2009; Price, 2008). Thus, it could be suggested that hair color but also hair length as well as hairstyle could serve as physical cues, and that women may arrange their hair in a way to attract potential mates. The way in which women use their hair to attract potential mates was not examined in this study but our results suggest that men could perceive a woman with long hair falling down her neck, shoulders and back as young and healthy with high fertility potential, which in turn could lead them to interact more readily with her, and could thus explain why they offered more help to the confederate who wore her hair in this way.

In this study the same target with her long hair displayed naturally on her neck, shoulders and upper back was helped more often by men walking behind her in the street. We stated that such hairstyle could increase the perceived length of her hair which in turn could influence the help they receive from men because research has reported that women with long hair are perceived to be more feminine, young, healthy and sexy (Mesko & Bereczkei, 2004). According to the Good Genes Sexual Selection Theory (Buss, 1998; Gangestad, 2001; Kirkpatrick, 1996) men are more sensitive (compared to women) to visual cues of their potential partners’ health status because health is a prominent cue of the reproductive value for males. Accordingly, men are more attracted by women that they perceive to be more healthy or young and this could explain why they offered help more often in this study. However, offering help could also be a way for a man to increase his own attractiveness for the target (Díaz-Muñoz, DuVal, Krakauer & Lacey, 2014). Women can only have few children compared to men. Thus, they need to be sure that their offspring will have the resources that can help them to survive. Accordingly women value in men, income and status (Buss, 1998; Kenrick et al., 1993; Shackelford et al., 2005) but also on men who cooperate and can help them when needed (Amador, Charles, Tait & Helm 2005). Thus, in this study offering help to the woman confederate is both a way for a man to interact with her but also to be perceived has a helper and then to increase his own interest for the woman.

Of course this study has several limitations. The confederate was not informed about the real objective of the study and previous research on this topic. However, she may have unconsciously behaved differently, which in turn influenced the participants’ behavior. The fact that no difference was found between the ponytail and the bun conditions seems to guard against this possibility, but this bias remains in question. Only one confederate was used and replication using confederates of different heights and weights should be conducted in the future. This study was conducted in France and the generalizability of our results to other cultures appears necessary. Past research reported sometimes contradiction in the results reported. Bereczkei and Mesko (2006) reported that long hair is perceived as being “determined, intelligent, independent” while Terry and Krantz (1993) reported that long hair was associated with decreased forcefulness. Thus cultural replication appears necessary. Research reported that men helped women with blond hair more frequently (Guéguen & Lamy, 2009; Lynn, 2009; Price, 2008) and this latter study also suggested that long hair and natural style positively influenced helping behavior. Helping could be considered as a seduction-like behavior. Thus, it could be interesting in the future to further examine approaching, seduction-like behaviors of men (spontaneous approach, smiling addressed to the confederate, gazing, etc.) with targets wearing different hair styles.

In conclusion, the findings reported in this study support the assumption that women’s hairstyle exerts an influence on men’s behavior. These results are consistent with previous studies showing that men are influenced by women’s physical
characteristics and that women’s hair features exert an effect on male behavior and judgment. These findings also suggest that hairstyle could serve as a cue for potential mates and that women probably use their hair to display important qualities for men: probably health, sexiness, femininity and youthfulness. Despite the limitations of this study, our results based on an experiment in a field setting examining real behavior seem to show that women’s hair is an important aspect of their appearance and suggest several directions for future research in this area.

REFERENCES

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