

Fertile women rate other women as uglier

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Women judge the attractiveness of other women more harshly when at their most fertile, suggests a new study. The phenomenon could be a strategy to devalue potential rivals, says the psychologist behind the work - being bitchy about others could help a woman win the attention of a desirable man.

Theories of sexual selection in most species usually concentrate on how males compete for females. But recent theories for humans suggest there is intrasexual competition among females as well, as males can vary markedly in their abilities as providers and protectors.

Maryanne Fisher, a psychologist at York University in Toronto, Canada, decided to try to find evidence for female competition by presenting heterosexual students with photos of faces. She found that when women were in the most fertile phase of their menstrual cycles, they rated the attractiveness of other women lower than when they were not.

"Often women are characterised as being very co-operative, very kind-hearted and not competing directly," Fisher told **New Scientist**. "But there's been a fair bit of work on how women are indirectly aggressive."

For example, she says: "Rather than saying 'I'm going to beat that woman up because she looked at you', it's 'Oh my goodness, look how fat her ankles are!'"

Caring or rugged

Being more combative during a fertile period backs the idea that women are competing for the best mate. "When you're in a high fertility phase, you have to be more able to judge other women as potential rivals," says Fisher.

David Perrett, an expert on facial perception at St Andrew's University, UK, says: "It's a very interesting finding. This is the first study I know of to find attitudes to female faces changing [with the menstrual cycle]."

Perrett's group previously found that women preferred more feminine, caring looking men for most of the month, but preferred more rugged, dominant looking types during the most fertile phase of their cycle.

In contrast, the women's attitudes towards male faces did not appear to vary with the menstrual cycle in this new study.

Neutral expression

The 57 female students tested, along with male controls, were asked to look at colour photos of 35 female and 30 male faces. The models for the photos were asked to display a neutral facial expression, wear a black smock and remove any accessories to help standardise the experiment.

Women with high estrogen levels, in days 12 to 21 of their menstrual cycle, rated other women's attractiveness significantly lower than women in a less fertile, low estrogen period of their cycle.

Fisher does not know exactly how women's heightened sense of competition during ovulation may help them win a mate. "Does putting someone down make you feel better about yourself? Or does saying it to a male make her less attractive to him?" she asks.

She adds that this kind of intrasexual competition could also carry risks - being too bitchy could make a woman look "mean-spirited" to a man. To answer these questions, Fisher is now investigating how men's attitudes are affected by women using such derogatory tactics.

Ben Jones, a psychologist working with Perrett at St Andrew's, points out that Fisher's results may not necessarily reflect simple derogatory tactics. Previous research has shown that women also rate their own attractiveness as higher when their fertility is high.

"Indeed, the fluctuations in women's perception of their own attractiveness may reflect real physical changes caused by estrogen, for example lip colouration and fullness," he says. "So the women may be objectively correct in seeing others as less attractive."

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