

The effects of good looks on professional success: It's complicated

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4/13/2017



Beauty can be consoling, disturbing, sacred, and profane; it can be exhilarating, appealing, inspiring, and chilling. It can affect us in an unlimited variety of ways. Yet it is never viewed with indifference: beauty demands to be noticed; it speaks to us directly like the voice of an intimate friend. If there are people who are indifferent to beauty, then it is surely because they do not perceive it. – Roger Scruton, *Beauty*

After I did a presentation on the downsides of attractiveness for women, a person in the audience asked me if I thought my appearance had helped me get ahead in my career. I was not quite sure how to respond. The individual either thought I was unattractive (and was so bold as to publicly state this fact) and was asking if being so unattractive had helped me get ahead or thought I was attractive (still a bold move to call me out) and clearly had not paid attention to the presentation. I chose to answer with, “I dunno,” and point out that in academia our research is generally reviewed “blind” so the reviewers don’t know who you are and, therefore, don’t know how you look. In any case, it is clear that most people think that looks matter and don’t feel at all sheepish about pointing that out. I would agree that looks matter – but it is not always in the way that most people think.

Most research shows that good looks are beneficial for men and women at work. For example, [research](#) often shows that attractive individuals earn more money than less attractive individuals – about 20 per cent more! But this well-known finding has come under question as [new research](#) shows that very attractive people *and* very unattractive people tend to earn more than their less extreme counterparts. The study of 20,745 participants further suggests that the findings don’t really demonstrate a bias. In fact, attractive individuals only earn more because they are more intelligent, more healthy, and have better personalities than those with more average levels of physical attractiveness. So much for the beauty premium.

Moreover, there is evidence that attractiveness can sometimes be detrimental for women applying for masculine jobs, a phenomenon referred to as the beauty is beastly effect. The beauty is beastly effect was first identified in the [1970s](#) and the findings showed that women applying for masculine jobs actually suffered a pretty penalty because

their attractiveness results in inferences that the woman is more feminine. If a job is more masculine (such as manager), then the inferred femininity represents a lack of fit with the masculine requirements of the job. Over the next 20 years several more studies emerged on this effect although most research suggested that attractiveness is a benefit.

Some time ago, my colleagues and I conducted [research](#) to determine *when* beauty is beastly. In a study using a multitude of jobs, we asked people to rate the employment suitability of over 200 photos of men and women varying in attractiveness. We found that attractive women were seen as less suitable for masculine jobs than less attractive women – but only for masculine jobs for which attractiveness seemed unimportant to the job itself. Car salesperson is a masculine job but one can imagine that attractiveness would be beneficial to the job because it is a sales-oriented, customer-focused job. Engineer is also a masculine job, but one for which attractiveness would not be seen as beneficial so attractive women would be penalised. Attractiveness was not always a benefit for men, but was rarely a cost. We replicated the finding using experiments and again found that attractive women are penalised when applying for masculine jobs for which attractiveness is not relevant.

As shown in the chart, women tended to be seen as more suitable for feminine jobs than masculine jobs. Moreover, attractive women (the checkered bars) tended to be rated as more suitable for employment than less attractive women. The exception, of course, was an attractive woman applying for a masculine job for which appearance was not important (the graph depicts the results of the job of prison guard but other jobs used in the study that were masculine/appearance unimportant were manager of research and development, director of finance, mechanical engineer, director of security, hardware salesperson, construction supervisor, and tow truck driver).

Figure 1



Of course, most people would say that beauty is in the eye of the beholder. We, no doubt, find our children, friends, and romantic partners to be particularly attractive. But the majority of evidence suggests that attractiveness is actually pretty objective. For example, infants who are unlikely to be influenced by cultural standards of beauty, tend to stare longer at faces that are rated as conventionally attractive. There are also clear neurological effects of looking at pictures that have been deemed attractive. Specifically, looking at attractive faces activates several reward centres in the [brain](#) including the nucleus accumbens, the medial prefrontal cortex, and the anterior cingulate cortex. Even [across cultures](#), most people agree on the facial attractiveness of men and women.

So what makes someone attractive? Attractiveness for women has been associated with a smaller [waist-to-hip ratio](#) of 0.6 to 0.7 and a body mass index of 17 to 20 in western cultures. For men, there is some evidence that a lower [waist to chest ratio](#) is associated with attractiveness. [Facial attractiveness](#) is characterised by masculinity/femininity, averageness, and symmetry. Masculinity/ femininity is a secondary sexual characteristic and reflects an individual's health. Average faces are preferred because of our general preference for well-known rather than novel cues. Symmetrical faces also are perceived to be healthier.

So why would feminine, symmetrical, average women be discriminated against in a male dominated workforce? Of course, some of it is the lack of fit we mentioned between the femininity of the pretty woman and the masculinity of the job. But other factors seem to be at work. When pretty women apply for masculine jobs they are also violating gender norms for women. They might be seen as trying to be more masculine and people tend to react negatively to masculine women (or feminine men for that matter). So, the woman is either too feminine to do the job or is trying to be masculine, which elicits equally negative reactions.

But, there may be other more subtle biases at play. Work with some of my colleagues suggest that there is something slightly untrustworthy about beautiful women – a sort of femme fatale effect. It is possible that people somewhat unconsciously, believe that attractive women could take advantage of them so they don't trust them. In addition, some recent findings suggest that people may want to retaliate against attractive women to make up for the presumed benefits that they receive based on their looks. If we all believe that attractive women are getting ahead (despite evidence to the contrary), it creates a feeling of unfairness and we want to penalise attractive women to make up for the inequity.

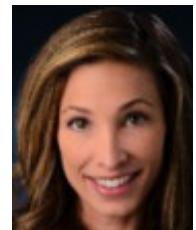
As a result, people may punish attractive women even if they have never actually benefitted from their looks. What is interesting is that these effects do not seem to extend to men. As such, the bias against attractive women really represents a subtle form of gender discrimination. Maybe the best advice would be to stop judging people (positively or negatively) based on their appearance and really consider things like actual work performance when determining hiring and salary decisions.

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Notes:

- *This blog post is based on the author's paper [Physical Attractiveness Biases in Ratings of Employment Suitability: Tracking Down the "Beauty is Beastly" Effect](#), co-authored with Kenneth E. Podratz, Robert L. Dipboye and Ellie Gibbons, in the *Journal of Social Psychology*, Volume 150, 2010 – Issue 3*
- *The post gives the views of its author, not the position of LSE Business Review or the London School of Economics.*
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Stefanie K. Johnson is an assistant professor of management at the University of Colorado, Boulder's Leeds School of Business. She did her PhD at Rice University and is particularly interested in the effects of unconscious biases in the evaluation of women and minorities with the goal of finding ways to mitigate those biases. Stefanie has published 40 journal articles and book chapters in outlets such as Harvard Business Review, Journal of Applied Psychology and The Academy of Management Journal. She has presented her work at over 50 meetings around the world including at the White House for a 2016 summit on diversity in corporate America on National Equal Pay Day and the 2016 Harvard Negotiation and Leadership Conference. She has extensive consulting experience and has created and delivered leadership development training with an emphasis on evidence-based practice. She has received multiple million dollars in federal and other grant funding to study



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