

The Plainness Penalty: Lookism in Western Culture

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Do looks matter? Americans like to think that the principle of equality tempers our society. Our vision of justice is the blindfolded woman holding the perfect scales aloft; however, since the founding of this country, justice has struggled with the human tendency to peek from beneath the blindfold. Race, gender, age, even physical disability have all been addressed by the American justice system, and each time, legislation was passed prohibiting discrimination based on outward appearance. This is America, and we don't do that; we don't tolerate "-isms."

In 1991, a new "-ism" entered the English lexicon. Mary Dunn, president of Smith College, distributed an official document to the student body outlining proscribed attitudes among students and faculty. Among her list of "-isms" she included "lookism," which she defined as, "the construction of a standard for beauty/attractiveness" (Siegel 38). Fred Siegel quoted this document as proof that political correctness and multiculturalism had become a "cult" (Siegel 34) and to suggest that the idea of discrimination on the basis of "ugliness" was ridiculous. However, a year later, in November 1992, the *Journal of Business Ethics* asked the title question, "Affirmative Action for a Face Only a Mother Could Love?" (Crow and Payne 869). The authors suggested that "attractiveness as an employment-rated criteria may become a legal issue" (Crow and Payne 869) under the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA). According to the ADA, an individual is disabled if she has "1. a physical or mental impairment that substantially limits one or more major life activities; 2. a record of such an impairment; or 3. is regarded as having such an

impairment" (Solovay 135). The authors reason as follows: obesity and disfigurement are now included as disabilities or impairments under the ADA; however, "the real issue is that people with these conditions are perceived as unattractive. Consequently, unattractiveness, and not disability, is the basis for discrimination against people who are obese or disfigured" (Crow and Payne 871).

Is there a premium for prettiness? Intuitively most people agree that better-looking individuals of either gender do, at least occasionally, receive preferential treatment. But, is there a penalty for plainness? Should the ugly qualify for protection under the law? The purpose of this paper is to establish the existence of a "plainness penalty" in American society and to suggest that, while "ugly" may qualify legally as an addition to the list of disabilities under the ADA¹, labeling plainness as a disability is not the best solution.

Pretty or plain? Says who?

One of the chief obstacles to addressing the issue of lookism is establishing a standard definition of pretty and plain. Researchers investigating the social and psychological implications of beauty in culture struggle to find a scientifically sound standard. Daniel Hamermesh and Jeff Biddle have worked together for years in the study of the economic impact of beauty on the labor market. They immediately address this

¹ For the purposes of this paper, the issues of discrimination based on disfigurement or weight are not included as they are already covered by the Americans with Disabilities Act.

issue in each presentation of their findings, “considering whether it is possible to use measures of beauty as if they were objective descriptions” (Hamermesh and Biddle, 1994, 1175). Standards of beauty vary among and within cultures; Japanese women want oval eyes, and Ubangi tribesmen value stretched lower lips. Further, cultural standards of beauty change over time. In 1891, San Francisco-based Ritter & Company hawked “‘Fat-Ten-U’ Foods” to combat the “shame [of a] poor thin figure” (Toronto 104). In 2002, American marketers hawk “Slim Fast” to combat the shame of a large figure.

In spite of these variations in taste across and within cultures, according to Hamermesh and Biddle (as well as other researchers), “within a culture at any point in time there is tremendous agreement on standards of beauty, and these standards change quite slowly” (1994, 1175). In one study, researchers asked participants ranging in age from 7 to 50 to rank the physical appearance of people depicted in photographs; regardless of the age or gender of the respondents, the responses of participants were consistent regarding the overall attractiveness or lack of attractiveness of each person in the photographs. Further, when a group of individuals was photographed periodically at different ages in their adult lives, attractiveness ratings remained consistent throughout the years (Hatfield and Sprecher 282-283). Thus, much like obscenity in art, while we can’t describe beauty, “we know it when we see it.”

There is much debate in the scientific community as to why beauty exists as a standard in cultures. Naomi Wolf, in her work *The Beauty Myth*, proposes that Western culture is a “culture of beauty” (Wolf 5) fed by the media’s incessant barrage of images of “perfect” beauty (particularly of female beauty). We have

become a culture that loves beauty because we have been taught to love beauty. On the other hand, anthropologists respond that a positive reaction to physical attractiveness developed as an evolutionary aid. Through successive generations, mate selection favored traits that indicated health and strength—clear skin, shiny hair, and healthy, symmetrical bodies (Fink et al 92). Over the eons of evolution, a taste for beauty evolved that would most greatly benefit the human gene pool. Today, that preference for beauty has gone beyond mate selection to be associated with all qualities good and beneficial.

Social scientists describe the tendency to associate beauty with moral character as the “halo effect.” According to researcher Feingold, “Socially desirable characteristics were more often ascribed to attractive students than to unattractive students, implying a ‘beautiful-is-good’ halo effect of attractiveness” (305). Thus, in mock trial settings, juries gave attractive defendants lighter sentences than less attractive defendants charged under the exact same evidence (Buck and Tiene 172). In a similar vein, audiences considered attractive speakers to be more persuasive than less attractive speakers (Buck and Tiene 172), attractive people were more likely to receive help in emergency situations (Juhnke et al 317), and elementary students rated more attractive teachers as “nicer” and “smarter” than their less attractive counterparts (Buck and Tiene 175).

Feingold analyzed research data from more than 100 studies on the sociological and psychological effects of beauty. He found that certain stereotypes persisted regarding beautiful people: “Physically attractive people of both sexes were perceived as more sociable, dominant, sexually warm, mentally healthy, and socially skilled [...] than physically

unattractive people.” On the negative side, the physically attractive “were seen as less modest” (Feingold 340). Yet, in studies of the actual personality and character traits of individuals based on physical appearance, the stereotypes were proven false. Good looks didn’t make an individual particularly “good” in other areas.

Beauty and the Bottom-line

Based on the idea of universally accepted cultural standards of beauty, Hamermesh and Biddle conducted a first-of-its-kind research study into the dollars-and-cents impact of physical appearance on men and women. (Earlier studies most frequently investigated the impact of physical appearance on mate selection and social interactions.) Using three different panels over the period of four years, interviewers collected detailed labor demographics from a cross-section of North Americans. The interviewers were asked to rate the physical appearance of survey participants on a five-point scale: 1) Strikingly beautiful or handsome; 2) Above average for age (good looking); 3) Average for age; 4) Below average for age (quite plain); 5) Homely (Hamermesh and Biddle, 1994, 1180)². The results were definitive: “people who are better-looking receive higher pay, while bad-looking people earn less than average, other things equal” (Hamermesh and Biddle, 1994, 1187).

The degree of wage difference depended on the beauty hierarchy. The plainer respondents earned less on average than the average-looking respondents, who in turn, earned less than the more attractive

respondents. The results revealed a 9-percent wage penalty for those in the lowest category of appearance, while those in the highest category received a 5-percent wage premium (Hamermesh and Biddle, 1994, 1186). While many scholars feel that women suffer more than men in society as a result of standards of beauty, the results of this study showed an equal if not greater impact on men; the economic penalty for “homely” men was 9 percent, while for homely women, the penalty was 4 percent.

Unattractive women may face another plainness penalty not measured by wage alone; “women face an additional economic penalty for bad looks in the form of marriage to husbands whose potential earnings abilities are lower” (Hamermesh and Biddle, 1994, 1189). With age and education held constant, the study revealed that a woman’s looks were “completely unrelated to her likelihood of being married” (Hamermesh and Biddle, 1994, 1188); however, “below-average-looking women marry men whose educational attainment is one year less than what the women’s own characteristics, including her educational attainment, predict” (Hamermesh and Biddle, 1994, 1189). No such penalty exists for below-average-looking men, and there is no premium for more attractive persons, either male or female, in the quality of marriage mate.

In a follow-up study, Hamermesh and Biddle narrowed the focus of the economic impact of beauty to specific career fields that require specialized training and talents. They tracked the earnings of graduates of a particular, well-respected law school over a twenty-year period. Using yearbook photos taken the year of graduation, a panel rated the appearance of the lawyers on the same five-point scale used in the earlier study: from strikingly attractive to homely. The results revealed “a tremendous persistence of beauty over ...

² To isolate beauty as the determining economic variable, other factors were identified and controlled in the calculations: marital status, education, and health status; therefore, comparisons can be made where “all else is equal” (Hamermesh and Biddle, 1994, 1180).

the life cycle” (Hamermesh and Biddle, 1998, 183). Not only were better-looking lawyers working longer hours by mid-career, these attorneys were also billing at higher rates. Above-average-looking lawyers were more likely to work in private practice (where finding and maintaining clients is much more important than in the public sector) and were more likely to work as litigators (facing judges and jurors). In cold, hard cash, “a one standard-deviation increase in average beauty is worth \$3,200 to the average public-sector attorney, but \$10,200 to the average private-sector attorney” (Hamermesh and Biddle, 1998, 185). The attractiveness premium did not always pay out equally by gender. Attractive male lawyers attained partner status earlier than their less attractive counterparts; however, beauty for female lawyers lessened their chances of an early partnership (Hamermesh and Biddle, 1998, 186). These results have been duplicated in numerous other studies, indicating a real economic impact to the less-than-attractive.

Beauty and the Beast

According to the ADA, what makes a disability a disability is not necessarily the physical byproduct of the trait; rather “a public perception of impairment” qualifies a characteristic as an impairment. Do Americans culturally perceive ugliness as an impairment? While earlier studies clearly demonstrate the halo-effect toward the beautiful, other studies indicate that in circumstances where subjects are better known to one another, attractiveness has little bearing on help-giving or positive performance assessments (Juhnke et al 317; Buck and Tiene 172). So, are there prejudices against the ugly?

A joint study between the London School of Economics and Carnegie Mellon University, spearheaded by the London

School’s Matthew Mulford, investigated how subjects responded to what they perceived as “physical attractiveness” (Mulford 1576). The results demonstrated that “subjects are more likely to enter play [social interactions] with others they judge as attractive... [and] are more likely to choose to cooperate with others they judge as attractive” (Mulford 1585). Test subjects not only were less willing to interact with the less attractive, they judged the unattractive to be less likely to cooperate than the more attractive. Further, the study revealed that an individual’s self-assessment of attractiveness affected his or her attitudes and actions toward others: “Males who see themselves as more attractive more often cooperate than those who see themselves as less so, while females who see themselves as more attractive less often cooperate than those who see themselves as less so” (Mulford 1585).

As a result of the study, Mulford concluded that less attractive members of society do not have the same opportunities for social interactions as do the better looking. Prejudices exist, and those prejudiced against have limited opportunity to address those prejudices: “Our willingness to enter play with people we find attractive, in other words, does provide a basis in experience for finding that beauty is only skin deep (when that is true), but our unwillingness to play with people we find unattractive does not provide an equivalent basis for finding that plainness is only skin deep (when that is true)” (Mulford 1589).

Rate yourself

The evidence clearly indicates that not only is there a premium for prettiness in Western culture, there is also penalty for plainness. In studies where other economic factors are held equal, wages fall along a hierarchy of beauty, with a bonus to the very

beautiful and a loss to the very plain. As a result of stereotypes of beauty and the lack thereof, not only do the beautiful benefit from a “beauty is good” ideal, the less-attractive members of society suffer as a result of the converse “ugly is bad” misconception. Society’s lack of willingness to cooperate with plain people may in fact limit the possibilities of the unattractive to prove the stereotype wrong. Studies reveal that plainness potentially “limits one or more major life activities,” thus technically qualifying this trait as a disability under the Americans with Disabilities Act.

However, before qualifying the ugly as disabled, another aspect of beauty

research must be considered. In Feingold’s meta-analysis of beauty studies, he determined, “Self-rated physical attractiveness was positively and appreciably related to most [positive] attributes” (Feingold 341). In the Mulford study, women who perceived themselves as more attractive were the most successful in the test “regardless of how others saw them” (Mulford 1578). Apparently, self-perception has an effect on success. Rather than add to the growing list of disabilities on the ADA, perhaps it would be more economically feasible to teach people to value their own attractiveness, “regardless of how others saw them.”

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