



Mirror, mirror on the wall, who's the fairest of them all? Thinking that one is attractive increases the tendency to support inequality



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ABSTRACT

Five studies tested the hypothesis that self-perceived attractiveness shapes people's perceptions of their social class (subjective SES), which, in turn, shape how people respond to inequality and social hierarchies. Study 1 found that self-perceived attractiveness was associated with support for group-based dominance and belief in legitimizing ideologies, and that these relationships were mediated by subjective social class. Subsequent experiments showed that higher self-perceived attractiveness increased subjective SES, which in turn, increased SDO (Study 2 and Study 5); promoted stronger beliefs in dispositional causes of inequality (Study 3); and reduced donations to a movement advocating for social equality (Study 4). By contrast, lower self-perceived attractiveness decreased subjective SES, which in turn, led to a greater tendency to reject social hierarchies and to construe inequality in terms of contextual causes. These effects emerged even after controlling for power, status, and self-esteem, and were not simply driven by inducing people to see themselves positively on desirable traits (Study 4 and Study 5).

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Introduction

Social inequality is at the forefront of today's national consciousness and political debates (Pew Research Center, 2012). Attitudes about inequality not only reflect people's ideological preferences but also affect how people approach important social issues, such as how public goods should be distributed, how much the wealthy should be taxed, and whether lucrative industries should be regulated (cf. Price, Kang, Dunn, & Hopkins, 2011). In organizations, people's attitudes about inequality influence what they perceive to be fair (Tyler, 1994), what they feel they are entitled to (Miller, 2001), and how enthusiastic they support social and organizational policies (e.g., affirmative action; Sidanius & Pratto, 1999).

The question of what makes people more or less egalitarian is a prolific area of research that has been studied extensively in social (e.g., Lowery, Unzueta, Knowles, & Goff, 2006; Monin & Miller, 2001; Schmitt, Branscombe, & Kappen, 2003) and personality psychology (e.g., Pratto, Sidanius, Stallworth, & Malle, 1994). In the current research, we extend this rich literature by investigating a specific and previously unexamined idea: that people's beliefs about their physical attractiveness (self-perceived attractiveness) can also influence whether people will support or reject inequality.

We propose that when cues suggest to people that they are more attractive, they will espouse *more* favorable attitudes toward inequality and social hierarchies; by contrast, when cues suggest to people that they are less attractive, they will espouse *less* favorable attitudes toward inequality and social hierarchies.

Why might people's beliefs about their physical attractiveness influence their attitudes about inequality? In the current research, we suggest (and demonstrate) that this occurs because people's beliefs about their physical attractiveness influence their perception of their *social class*. Specifically, we posit that higher self-perceived attractiveness would lead one to a perception of relatively higher social class membership, which, in turn, would result in having a more favorable view of inequality. By contrast, we posit that lower self-perceived attractiveness would lead one to a perception of relatively lower social class membership, which, in turn, would lead to greater rejection of inequality and social hierarchies (Brandt, 2013).

Our interest in studying self-perceived attractiveness stems from the observation that being physically attractive is an important goal for many people, even during times of economic hardship (Allison & Martinez, 2010; Schaefer, 2008). Records indicate that Americans today spend over 200 billion dollars a year on their physical appearance despite poor economic conditions (Rhode, 2010), and are willing to expend more money on grooming than on reading material (United States Census Bureau, 2012). In 2011, the American Society of Plastic Surgeons (ASPS) also estimated that approximately 13 million cosmetic surgeries were

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performed in the United States, which is now the fastest-growing area of medical expenditures of the last decade (ASPS, 2012; Rhode, 2010).

The staggering amounts of money and time that people invest to become physically attractive led us to entertain the idea that perhaps, physical attractiveness is not just a cultural obsession, but a substantially important attribute by which the social hierarchy is fundamentally organized. We suspect that physical attractiveness is one important dimension in which humans sort themselves into positions of low and high rank (Kraus, Piff, Mendoza-Denton, Rheinschmidt, & Keltner, 2012), and thus people's beliefs about whether they are attractive or not should influence their perception of their standing in the social hierarchy. If our contention were accurate, then situations and experiences that change people's beliefs about their physical appearance would also change how people see themselves in relation to others.

Self-perceived attractiveness

Self-perceived attractiveness refers to people's beliefs about the quality of their physical appearance. The majority of prior work on this topic has focused primarily on how self-perceived attractiveness relates to people's personality and social behavior (see Feingold, 1992 for a meta-analysis). For example, past scholarship has shown that people who think that they are highly attractive are also more likely to be extraverted, psychologically healthy, and more popular with the opposite sex. In this paper, we suggest that the extent to which people believe that they are physically attractive can also influence their beliefs about whether they belong to a relatively higher or lower social class.

Social class

Social class is a combination of both *material resources* (e.g., income, educational attainment, occupational prestige; *objective SES*) and *perceived rank vis-à-vis* others in the social hierarchy (*subjective SES*; Kraus, Piff, & Keltner, 2009). Our focus in this investigation is on subjective social class (Adler, Epel, Castellazzo, & Ickovics, 2000; Kraus et al., 2009; Laurin, Fitzsimons, & Kay, 2011; Piff, Stancato, Côté, Mendoza-Denton, & Keltner, 2012). Emerging work suggests that subjective social class shapes how people construe their social world, independent of their *actual* objective resources (for a review see Kraus et al., 2012). For example, the perception that they are in a lower class can increase people's attentiveness to their social environment (Kraus, Horberg, Goetz, & Keltner, 2011), susceptibility to the effects of stress (Adler et al., 2000), and the likelihood that they will behave compassionately and prosocially (Piff, Kraus, Côté, Cheng, & Keltner, 2010). By contrast, the perception that they are in an upper class can lead to reduced sensitivity to threat (Kraus et al., 2012), lower willingness to observe ethical norms (Piff et al., 2012), and a stronger desire for freedom and personal agency (Kraus et al., 2012). Social class perceptions, therefore, constitute an important cause of people's attitudes and behaviors, and are particularly useful for understanding how organizational members approach and affirm organizational hierarchies (see Côté, 2011).

Whereas past work suggests that individuals assess their social class by evaluating themselves and comparison others on traditional economic indicators (e.g., wealth, educational attainment, occupational prestige; see Kraus et al., 2009), we propose that people can also infer their social class based on subtle cues, such as their judgments about their own physical appearance (*self-perceived attractiveness*). We propose that when cues suggest to people that they are more attractive, it should lead them to think that they belong to a relatively higher social class; by contrast, when cues suggest to people that they are less attractive, it should

lead them to think that they belong to a relatively lower social class.

Why might self-perceived attractiveness shape subjective social class?

Although cultures vary in what is perceived as attractive (Rhode, 2010), prescriptive standards of beauty often reflect features that signal wealth and upper social class membership. For example, in societies where food is scarce, plumpness signals that one has resources, and is considered to be an attractive quality; however, where food is abundant, thinness is seen as an attractive trait (Sobal & Stunkard, 1989). In the Western context, physical traits that more frequently appear in the upper social class define the ideal standard of beauty (e.g., light skin, straight hair, Anglo-European features; Rhode, 2010) – indicating that we derive our definitions of attractiveness from the features of the upper social class.

While most societies derive the standards of beauty from the features of the upper social class, individuals also form inferences about the social class membership of other people based on their physical appearance (Kalick, 1988). For example, during the 20th century, it was typical to infer the social class category of other people based on the lightness of their skin. Those with fair skin were considered beautiful and part of the elite, who could afford to spend their days inside shielded from the sun, while those with “red necks” were considered members of the working class, whose skin became tan from long hours in the field (Cassidy & Hall, 2002). Moreover, people tend to associate attractiveness with privilege and favored social treatment (Dermer & Thiel, 1975; Kalick, 1988), indicating that they see beauty as an important component of assignment in the class hierarchy.

Based on the evidence that people draw inferences about the wealth and social class of others based on their physical appearance (Kalick, 1988), we suspect they may apply those same inferences to themselves. For example, just as they judge attractive others as relatively higher social class, they may judge their own social class as higher to the extent they believe they possess physically attractive features. On the other hand, cues that suggest to people that they are lacking attractive qualities should lead them to conclude that they belong to a relatively lower and less privileged social class. In the present research, our first hypothesis is that people's beliefs about their physical attractiveness will influence their perceptions of their own class membership.

Subjective social class and inequality

Our second hypothesis is that differences in social class perceptions, driven by differences in self-perceived attractiveness, will predict attitudes toward inequality. We predicted that higher self-perceived attractiveness would lead to a perception of relatively higher social class membership, which, in turn, would lead to a more favorable view of inequality. By contrast, we expected that lower self-perceived attractiveness would lead to a perception of relatively lower social class membership, which, in turn, would lead to greater rejection of inequality and social hierarchies. In other words, we posit in our theoretical model that subjective SES will be a mediator between self-perceived attractiveness and attitudes toward inequality.

Our second hypothesis has been demonstrated in emerging work on subjective social class. Scholars have shown that members of the upper class espouse a more favorable view of social inequality (Piff et al., 2010) and have a greater propensity to endorse attitudes and beliefs that reinforce existing inequalities (Kraus & Keltner, 2013; Kraus et al., 2009). Recent work by Kraus (2013) suggest that people from the upper class are more inclined to endorse inequality because they are more motivated to maintain or

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