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Things are looking up: Physical beauty, social mobility, and optimistic dispositions

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ABSTRACT

Physical attractiveness tends to inspire friendlier reactions and more positive evaluations from others, so that the beautiful are likelier to succeed across many kinds of endeavors. Does this history of success lead to a more optimistic, hopeful attitude? Evidence from the 2016 General Social Survey and the 1972 National Election Study suggests that it often does: those whom interviewers rate as better-looking tend to report higher expectations that life will turn out well for them, and show signs of greater upward social mobility. Since optimism is itself an important contributor to success in many social endeavors, these findings suggest an understudied mechanism by which beauty leads to better life outcomes, as well as a means by which social interactions may shape personal dispositions.

1. Introduction

Virtually all fields of social science have found significant consequences of individuals' having hopeful or optimistic outlooks (e.g., [Huppert and So, 2013](#); [Key and Donovan, 2017](#); [Puri and Robinson, 2007](#); [Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi, 2000](#); [Rosler et al., 2017](#)). Those who have greater expectations that things will turn out well are more willing to take chances; those who take setbacks more readily in stride have more resilience in the face of anything from divorce to layoffs. Understanding what factors lead people to be more or less optimistic is consequently important.

One potential such factor is personal physical attractiveness. Society generally favors the good looking, so an appealing appearance leads to better outcomes in a wide variety of social, political, and economic situations ([Ahler et al., 2017](#); [Hamermesh and Biddle, 1994](#); [Webster and Driskell, 1983](#)). Beautiful people's steady experience of deference and success may tend to promote expectations that things will turn out well in the future, too. At the same time, good looks are to some extent determined by processes outside of conscious control. While lifestyle and grooming can also contribute to good looks, the partially exogenous nature of appearance makes it a causal factor potentially independent of most standard social-science mechanisms.

This paper accordingly explores the connection between individuals' physical attractiveness – as judged by interviewers in the 2016 General Social Survey and the 1972 National Election Study – and their level of optimism across several indicators. As hypothesized, the better-looking generally prove to have more positive attitudes about their future prospects. These findings are suggestive not only about the roots of dispositional optimism, but more generally about how social reactions to personal appearance have the potential to influence the life course.

1.1. Optimism and its antecedents

Positive expectations about life manifest themselves in several related but sometimes distinguished ways. Optimism may not be precisely the same as hope, in that the former involves beliefs that things are going or will go well, while the latter also speaks to a feeling

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of agency and possible improvement at times when things go less well (Bryant and Cvengros, 2004). That is, whereas an absence of pessimism merely means positive attitudes about future outcomes, an absence of hopelessness further implies a resiliency or feeling of efficacy. These concepts similarly can be distinguished from other connected concepts, such as a sense of “luckiness” (Darke and Freedman, 1997), but all speak to the idea that people vary in their beliefs about how good conditions or outcomes will be in the future.

These sorts of positive attitudes come from many possible sources. Many of these sources are social forces, built upon relationships to other actors in society (Bennett, 2011). Some evidence suggests optimism can be consciously cultivated, especially among the young, pointing to the key role of childhood socialization in producing a positive outlook (Gillham and Reivich, 2004; Goldsmith, 2004). Larger-scale social organizations such as religions can also contribute to a sense of optimism (Idler and Kasl, 1992). Meanwhile, for those extremely deficient in optimism, clinical therapies can sometimes increase it (Carver et al., 2010).

Several of the social sources of optimism suggest that it tends to flow to those who already possess status, income, or other desired qualities (Ek et al., 2004). Having these qualities generates more-positive experiences in most forms of social interaction. These positive experiences then encourage optimism about the future, as people learn from and make projections based on their pasts (Fraser and Greene, 2006; Higgins et al., 1997).

Important as social forces are, they are not the only determinants of optimistic outlooks. Twin studies suggest that genetic factors also play a role in positive expectations (Schulman et al., 1993; Plomin et al., 1992). Many of these genetic pathways to optimism, however, probably themselves reflect social relations (Forgeard and Seligman, 2012): being born with congenital qualities that society values likely provokes more positive reactions from others. That is, one might be born with qualities that tend to trigger more or less positive responses from others, with potentially pivotal consequences for one's own personality and outlook.

1.2. Beauty as a source of positive attitudes

One factor that might make encounters with others relatively rewarding is an attractive physical appearance, a condition fundamental in many social interactions. Indeed, one review of the causes of optimism explicitly conjectured that one of the mechanisms linking genes to a more optimistic outlook is personal beauty (Forgeard and Seligman, 2012: 114). This would fit with other findings about the social development of personality, where social status and personal outlook derive in part from how others react to one's appearance (Harris, 2011). Yet, with only rare exceptions (e.g., Kligman and Graham, 1986; Gupta et al., 2016), scholars have paid little attention to how attractiveness connects to positivity of disposition.

An attractive physical appearance is precisely the sort of characteristic that can precipitate the more positive outcomes that breed optimism. It inspires more success in professional life (Hamermesh and Biddle, 1994) as well as interpersonal relationships, especially but not only romantic or sexual ones (Rhodes et al., 2005). Although beauty can occasionally inspire jealousy or perceptions of callowness (Kuwabara and Thebaud, 2017), it most often serves as a diffuse asset. Good looks can cause or substitute for social status, either directly or by opening up opportunities for more conventional markers of status such as income and education (Bauldry et al., 2016; Haas and Gregory, 2005). Attractiveness also often leads to higher performance evaluations and more effectiveness even at tasks where physical appearance is not directly relevant to outcomes (Laustsen, 2014; Wolbring and Riordan, 2016): it conjures a “halo effect” making everything the attractive person does seem more impressive (Feingold, 1992). A generally higher propensity for success across all of these domains amply justifies expectations among the good-looking that events will usually turn out relatively well.

While this set of successful experiences is likely to instill more-optimistic expectations, it is less clear that it will lead to the resilience that falls under the heading of “hope” when that concept is distinguished from optimism. To the extent that the attractive have faced fewer setbacks and therefore had less experience of recovering from them, they may have developed fewer coping mechanisms. A tendency to experience things going right, that is, may not prepare individuals for the situation where things go wrong. Indeed, by contrast to the disproportionately favorable outcomes usually experienced, a misadventure – likely unanticipated and hence all the more disappointing under conditions of positive expectations – may seem especially bleak and hard to take. Hence, while having the social advantages of good looks could well inspire hope by making the attractive feel that they are the authors of their own success, the case linking better looks to greater hope is somewhat more ambiguous than the argument linking looks to optimism.

2. Looks and optimism in the 2016 General Social Survey

Despite the theoretical links between physical attractiveness and optimism (or hope), the link between them has seen relatively little empirical study. In part, this is because few data sources collect information about both attractiveness and positivity of disposition. One exception that does contain information about both issues is the 2016 edition of the General Social Survey (GSS), a nationally representative survey of the United States adult population.

2.1. Dependent and independent variables

The GSS contains three distinct measures of positive dispositions, the dependent variable for analysis here. One is a single-question item asking for level of agreement on a five-point scale (1 = strongly agree; 5 = strongly disagree) that “The way things are in America, people like me and my family have a good chance of improving our standard of living.”¹ This question looks at optimism on the specific issue of standard-of-living. The other relevant items, by contrast, mark more general positive expectation towards the

¹ Summary statistics for this and all variables in the reported analyses are presented in [Appendix B](#).

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