



Gender and the returns to attractiveness

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ABSTRACT

This study uses data from the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent to Adult Health (Add Health) to (1) replicate research that documents a positive association between physical attractiveness and income; (2) examine whether the returns to attractiveness differ for women and men; and 3) explore the role that grooming plays in the attractiveness-income relationship. We find that attractive individuals earn roughly 20 percent more than people of average attractiveness, but this gap is reduced when controlling for grooming, suggesting that the beauty premium can be actively cultivated. Further, while both conventional wisdom and previous research suggest the importance of attractiveness might vary by gender, we find no gender differences in the attractiveness gradient. However, we do find that grooming accounts for the entire attractiveness premium for women, and only half of the premium for men. Our findings underscore the social construction of attractiveness, and in doing so illuminate a key mechanism for attractiveness premia that varies by gender.

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1. Introduction

Embodied characteristics have important consequences for inequality. Similar to how members of certain racial and gender groups are more highly valued and rewarded than others (Schneider, 2013), beauty is valued and rewarded more than ugliness (Dion, Berscheid, & Walster, 1972). Research shows that physically attractive individuals are advantaged across a wide range of domains, including the classroom (Clifford & Walster, 1973), the marriage market (Jaeger, 2011), the criminal justice system (Ahola, Christianson, & Hellstrom, 2009), and the workplace (Kevin & Green, 1980; Hamermesh & Biddle, 1994; Watkins & Johnston, 2000; Judge, Hurst, & Simon, 2009). Whether attractiveness premia are due to discrimination (e.g., Belot, Bhaskar, & van de Ven, 2012), to differences in productivity and intelligence (e.g., Kanazawa & Kovar, 2004), or to both (e.g., Arunachalam & Shah, 2012), previous research suggests that attractiveness is an important axis of stratification (Gordon, Crosnoe, & Wang, 2013).

Although a large body of literature documents the returns to attractiveness, empirical research is less conclusive about the gender differences in the beauty premium—does being attractive matter more for men or women? Further, much research

takes attractiveness for granted—that is, attractiveness is generally thought of as a biological or fixed trait (c.f. Frevert & Walker, 2014; Langlois et al., 2000) even though it may be better understood as the combination of biological traits, personality characteristics, and beauty practices—and little is known about how grooming and other forms of beauty work (Kwan & Trautner, 2009) contribute to these premia. In this paper, we use OLS regression and nationally representative data to examine whether the attractiveness gradient in income differs for women and men, and explore the role that grooming plays in the attractiveness-income relationship. Our paper contributes to the literature on physical attractiveness by underscoring the social construction of attractiveness, particularly as it pertains to women. More broadly, we contribute to the literature on stratification by focusing on a consequential form of embodied capital that is often overlooked (Hakim, 2010).

2. Theoretical background and literature review

Previous research has found that physically attractive individuals are advantaged across a wide range of social arenas compared to less attractive individuals. Attractive individuals have greater power in everyday interactions (Mulford, Orbell, Shatto, & Stockard, 1998; Anderson, John, Keltner, & Kring, 2001), and attractive students are considered more intelligent by their teachers (Clifford & Walster, 1973; Parks, & Kennedy, 2007), are more popular among their classmates (Dion & Berscheid, 1974; Rosen & Underwood, 2010), and do better on exams (Cipriani & Zago, 2011). Attractive

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women are more likely to marry husbands with higher socioeconomic status (Jaeger, 2011). Further, even justice is not blind, as attractive criminal defendants receive less severe punishments than their unattractive counterparts (Ahola et al., 2009).

These advantages may stem from the bias that “what is beautiful is good” (Dion et al., 1972). This social psychological theory of the attractiveness premium posits that physically attractive individuals are thought to possess a wide variety of other positive characteristics. Empirical work shows that people often assume physically attractive individuals are more intelligent and competent (Webster & Driskell, 1983; Moore, Filippou, & Perrett, 2011), more cooperative (Mulford et al., 1998), and more trustworthy (Wilson & Eckel, 2006). Beauty, then, becomes a marker of general status (Webster & Driskell, 1983) and a form of embodied capital that individuals may leverage for personal gain (Hakim, 2010).

Given this research, it is not surprising that physical attractiveness has important labor market consequences. At the hiring stage, attractive job candidates are favored over unattractive applicants (Kevin & Green, 1980; Watkins & Johnston, 2000). In the review process, attractive individuals are more likely to be considered competent at their jobs (Quereshi & Kay, 1986; Jackson, Hunter, & Hodge, 1995; Hochschild & Borch, 2011) and thus receive better performance evaluations (Heilman & Stopek, 1985). Presumably as a result, attractive workers are promoted more often (Hochschild & Borch, 2011) and have higher earnings than average and unattractive workers (Hamermesh & Biddle, 1994; Fletcher, 2009; French, 2002; Judge et al., 2009; Jaeger, 2011). Thus, based on existing theory and research we expect to find that:

H1. More attractive individuals will have higher incomes than their average counterparts, and less attractive individuals will have lower incomes than their average counterparts.

While scholars agree that physical attractiveness is an advantageous trait, there is less agreement over whether attractiveness is more important for men or for women. Some empirical work finds a beauty premium for women but not men (e.g., French, 2002; Kaplan, 1978), or larger premia for women than men (e.g., Johnson, Podratz, Dipboye, & Gibbons, 2010). These findings are consistent with explanations of attractiveness premia suggesting that physical beauty may be more important for women than for men because of the unique importance of beauty to the feminine gender role (Jackson, 1992; Rhode, 2010; Wolf, 1991). In early research, Bar-Tal and Saxe (1976) argued that attractiveness is important for women because physical attractiveness is a major criterion for women's traditional social roles of sex object, wife, and child bearer. Despite women's changing roles in society, research suggests that the feminine beauty ideal has persisted and continues to shape women's experiences (Drogosz & Levy, 1995; Wolf, 1991; Baker-Sperry & Grauerholz, 2003; Jeffreys, 2005). In fact, Jeffreys (2005) argues that women's increased economic and social progress have been accompanied by increasingly strict beauty standards.

Where attractiveness is a highly desirable trait for women, attractiveness is thought to be less important for the traditional male role. Masculinity is associated less with physical beauty than with other qualities such as control, power, strength, and success; but most importantly masculinity is constructed in contrast to femininity (Connell, 1995). If beauty is a feminine quality then beauty is not masculine; thus it may not be rewarded in men.

Differences in workplace power might also lead beauty to be more important for women: men more often hold positions of power in the workplace (e.g., managers, supervisors) and have the ability to set wages (Haveman & Beresford, 2012). Some research suggests that men, more than women, are prone to discriminating in favor of attractive women, and that there is little effect of attractiveness on the ratings of men's work (Gueguen & Jacob, 2011; Kaplan 1978). Thus, we might expect work performed by attractive

women to be rated more highly by their male managers, contributing to a steeper attractiveness gradient in earnings among women.

However, other empirical work suggests that the relationship between gender, beauty, and workplace outcomes could run in the opposite direction. If attractive women are seen as more feminine (Heilman & Saruwatari, 1979; Drogosz & Levy, 1995; Rieger et al., 2009), and femininity is antithetical to the masculinized ideal worker norm (Acker, 1990), attractive women may be disadvantaged in the paid labor market relative to unattractive women who are seen as less feminine. In a classic study, Heilman and Saruwatari (1979) find that sometimes “beauty is beastly” – attractiveness helped women in non-managerial positions, but actually hurt women who were managers. This and more recent studies (e.g., Heilman & Stopek, 1985; Glick, Larsen, Johnson, & Branstiter, 2005; Johnson et al., 2010) suggest that gender role ideals play into perceptions of person-job fit, and since attractiveness corresponds with femininity for women, and femininity is inconsistent with conceptions of an ideal worker (and particularly for a worker in a position of power), an attractive woman in the workplace may be penalized. Because there is evidence suggesting that women might benefit more from attractiveness than men, as well as the notion that beauty is “beastly,” we test two hypotheses regarding gender differences:

H2a. The earnings premium for attractiveness differs by gender, and it is positive and larger for women than men.

H2b. The earnings premium for attractiveness differs by gender, and it is negative for women.

Despite some evidence that beauty is not always beneficial, physical attractiveness is generally valued and rewarded, so there are strong incentives to engage in beauty work (Hakim, 2010; Kwan & Trautner, 2009). Beauty work includes practices ranging from putting on makeup or choosing flattering outfits to dieting or undergoing cosmetic surgery, all to improve one's appearance. Scholars suggest that although appearance and grooming have become increasingly important to men (Pope, Phillips, & Olivardia, 2000; Barber, 2008; Dworkin & Faye, 2009), beauty work continues to be more salient for women because of cultural double standards with very strict prescriptions for women (Jeffreys, 2005; Rhode, 2010; Wolf, 1991).

Grooming helps to signal gender appropriateness (West & Zimmerman, 1987), and conformity to hegemonic ideals of masculinity and femininity is rewarded in the workplace (Schrock & Schwalbe, 2009). For example, female-to-male transsexuals who engage in more appearance management to signal masculinity were better able to establish competence and credibility in the workplace after their transition (Dozier, 2005). Women's grooming practices also help to convey credibility, and allow women assert power in the workplace (Dellinger & Williams, 1994; Haynes, 2012; Weitz, 2001). Dellinger and Williams (1994), for example, find that women link appearance to professionalism, and thus wear makeup to signal competence across a variety of occupations. Similarly, Weitz (2001) finds that some women cut their hair short to highlight professionalism and downplay femininity in order to gain power in the workplace. While these studies suggest that grooming may be more important for women, they also suggest that grooming may serve as a more general signal that both men and women use to highlight their productivity to employers (c.f. Spence, 1973). In short, research on beauty work suggests that men and women can manipulate their appearance for workplace rewards, but that beauty work may be more crucial for women.

Despite a growing literature on beauty work many scholars conceptualize attractiveness as a largely fixed, ascribed trait (c.f. Frevert & Walker, 2014; Langlois et al., 2000). By contrast grooming can be thought of as a component of attractiveness that is

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