



## Don't hate me because I'm beautiful: Acknowledging appearance mitigates the “beauty is beastly” effect



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### ABSTRACT

Physically attractive women are discriminated against when applying for masculine sex-typed jobs, a phenomenon known as the *beauty is beastly effect*. We conducted three studies to establish an intervention for mitigating the beauty is beastly effect and to determine mediators and moderators of the intervention. As expected, physically attractive women were rated higher in employment suitability when they acknowledged that their sex or physical appearance is incongruent with the typical applicant for a masculine sex-typed job. Acknowledgement increased inferences of positive masculine traits, allowing the female applicant to be perceived as more suitable for the job, while reducing perceptions that she possessed countercommunal traits, decreasing the violation of her gender role. Finally, sexist beliefs interacted with the acknowledgment intervention, such that the acknowledgement intervention reduced the negative relationship between hostile sexism and employment suitability and increased the positive relationship between benevolent sexism and employment suitability, relative to the control condition.

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### Introduction

In April 2012, Samantha Brick published a column in *The Daily Mail* titled “There are downsides to looking this pretty.” The subsequent backlash and media criticism were not surprising given that the benefits of physical attractiveness far outweigh any disadvantages (Eagly, Ashmore, Makhijani, & Longo, 1991). Physically attractive women are, however, discriminated against when applying for masculine sex-typed jobs—a phenomenon known as the *beauty is beastly effect* (Heilman & Saruwatari, 1979; Heilman & Stopeck, 1985). Although the beauty is beastly effect may not evoke strong feelings of sympathy, it demonstrates a subtle form of sex discrimination. The Civil Rights Act makes sex discrimination illegal in the workplace, including situations in which a neutral characteristic (i.e., physical attractiveness) becomes linked to a protected characteristic (i.e., sex).

Theoretically, the beauty is beastly effect occurs because of inferences related to a lack of fit and gender role violations (Eagly, 1987; Heilman, 2001). Specifically, salient features such as physical attractiveness and sex trigger stereotype inferences

that attractive women lack the traits necessary to succeed in a masculine job (Cash, Gillen, & Burns, 1977; Gillen, 1981; Heilman, 1983). Conversely, if a woman demonstrates that she has the requisite skills and experience needed for a masculine job, she violates her gender role and is, therefore, seen as lacking communal traits (Eagly, 1987). In fact, Heilman and colleagues have found that when women are successful in masculine jobs they are seen as possessing characteristics that are the *opposite* of the communal stereotype; they are seen as bitter, quarrelsome, selfish, deceitful, and devious (Heilman, Block, & Martell, 1995; Heilman, Block, Martell, & Simon, 1989). These traits are defined as countercommunal and reflect the image of an individual who is cold, hostile, and devoid of interpersonal skills (Heilman, Wallen, Fuchs, & Tamkins, 2004).

Due to the lack of fit expectations and social role violation, attractive women are viewed negatively when applying for masculine sex-typed jobs (Cash et al., 1977; Gillen, 1981; Heilman & Saruwatari, 1979; Heilman & Stopeck, 1985; Jackson, 1983; Johnson, Podratz, Dipboye, & Gibbons, 2010). Role violations may be seen as particularly egregious among attractive women because of their perceived femininity, which is incompatible with the traits necessary to succeed in the position at hand (Heilman, 2001). Further, the bias against physically attractive women is intensified in jobs where physical attractiveness is not advantageous for performing the job duties because there is greater misfit between

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the job requirements and women's physical appearance (Beehr & Gilmore, 1982; Johnson et al., 2010).

Although a breadth of research has examined the beauty is beastly effect, there are no established techniques for mitigating discrimination against attractive women applying for masculine sex-typed jobs. We advance discrimination theory surrounding this effect by developing an intervention—namely, acknowledging that one's physical appearance and sex are incongruent with the typical job applicant—and testing the effect of this intervention across three studies. Study 1 proposes that the acknowledgement intervention mitigates the beauty is beastly effect. Study 2 examines mediators of the effect of the intervention on ratings of employment suitability. Specifically, we propose that acknowledging one's physical appearance and sex leads evaluators to perceive that the female applicant is a better fit for the position because she possesses traits typically viewed as favorable in male job applicants (e.g., willing to take risks, independent, assertive). In addition, the acknowledgement intervention reduces inferences that the applicant possesses countercommunal traits. Finally, Study 3 proposes that sexist beliefs interact with acknowledging one's atypical appearance during a job interview, such that the intervention reduces the negative relationship between hostile sexism and employment suitability and increases the positive relationship between benevolent sexism and employment suitability, relative to a no acknowledgement control condition.

### Theoretical overview of acknowledging a stigma

There are no established techniques for reducing discrimination against attractive women applying for masculine sex-typed jobs. Attractiveness and sex are salient physical features making stereotype inferences particularly strong and automatic (Eagly et al., 1991; Fiske & Taylor, 1991; Hosoda, Stone-Romero, & Coats, 2003; Langlois et al., 2000; Stangor, Lynch, Duan, & Glass, 1992). Therefore, common methods for reducing stereotypes, such as providing more information about the stereotyped individual, are ineffective at reducing attractiveness effects (Hosoda et al., 2003; Langlois et al., 2000). Given the automatic nature of stereotypes related to physical attractiveness and sex, it should be most effective to directly address, rather than try to avoid, perceivers' stereotype inferences.

Acknowledging a stigma can reduce the effect of the stigma on evaluations by bringing perceivers' stereotypes to their attention, interrupting the automatic effects of stereotypes on social information processing and resulting in a more thorough evaluation of the target (Hebl & Kleck, 2002; Kunda & Thagard, 1996; Singletary & Hebl, 2009). In one study, Hebl and Kleck (2002) ran mock-job interviews in which an interviewee was in a wheelchair and either acknowledged or did not acknowledge his stigma. Acknowledgement took the form of (p. 229), "When people meet me, one of the first things that they notice is that I use a wheelchair." Stigmatized individuals were more likely to be hired when they acknowledged their disability. The benefits of acknowledging a stigma are enhanced when acknowledgment occurs early in the social interaction and when it is accompanied by information that reduces the stereotype in question (DeJong, 1980; Hebl & Kleck, 2002; Hebl & Skorinko, 2005).

Although physical attractiveness is generally beneficial, it can be thought of as a stigma when it is not perceived as desirable in a given domain. Goffman (1963) defined stigma as an "undesired differentness" (p. 5) and suggested that a particular characteristic can be advantageous in one situation but a stigma in another situation. Crocker, Major, and Steele (1998) note that because stigmas are socially constructed, the extent to which a characteristic is a stigma can vary across situations. Therefore, we conceptualize

physical attractiveness as a stigma for women applying for masculine sex-typed jobs.

Study 1 examined the effect of acknowledging a stigma when applying for a masculine sex-typed job in which physical attractiveness is not advantageous for performing the job duties (i.e., construction worker). Specifically, the applicant acknowledged her physical appearance (i.e., *I know I don't look like your typical construction worker*) or sex (i.e., *I know there are not a lot of women in this industry*) and we hypothesize that either manipulation will mitigate the beauty is beastly effect.

**Hypothesis.** Acknowledging one's physical appearance or sex will result in more favorable employment suitability ratings for a physically attractive female job applicant, relative to a physically unattractive female job applicant.

### Study 1

#### Method

##### Participants

Participants were 180 undergraduate students from a human subject pool. The subject pool consists of primarily white business school students (74%) and is about 55% male. The second largest racial category is Asian (16%). The mean age is approximately 26 years ( $SD = 5.68$ ).

##### Procedure

Participants were randomly assigned to one of six conditions in a 2 (unattractive female, attractive female)  $\times$  3 (control, acknowledge appearance, acknowledge sex) between-person design. Participants were told that they would be evaluating four finalists for a job in construction. Construction represents a masculine sex-typed job in which physical attractiveness is unimportant; thus, it should elicit the beauty is beastly effect (Johnson et al., 2010). The application packet consisted of interview transcripts with the same four interview questions for each applicant and a picture of each applicant on the transcript. Three of the applicants were male and were used as filler applicants. The focal applicant was female, and she was always the second applicant in the packet.

We experimentally manipulated whether the women in the photos were physically attractive or unattractive. The photos were headshots from a university yearbook, and the women were similar on a variety of dimensions including age and race. They were also both wearing interview-appropriate clothing, had shoulder length hair, and neither was wearing eyeglasses. However, the women differed based on physical attractiveness; Johnson et al.'s (2010) research established that the attractive and unattractive women were one standard deviation above and below the mean on ratings of physical attractiveness made by 204 college students.

Acknowledgement was manipulated by altering the response to a question regarding why the applicant should be hired. In the control condition the applicant said, *You should hire me because my skills and work experience are a perfect fit for this job. If you look at my work history, you will see that I have been successful in this industry and I am motivated to do the job.* In the acknowledge physical appearance condition, *I know that I don't look like your typical construction worker, but...* was inserted at the beginning of the second sentence of the control condition response; in the acknowledge sex condition, *I know that there are not a lot of women in this industry, but...* was inserted in the same place in the transcript. We placed the manipulation early in the transcript because acknowledging at the beginning or middle of an interview is more effective than at the end of an interview, and we linked the acknowledgement with stereotype-inconsistent information (i.e., *you will see that I have*

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