

Exploring the impact of male and female facial attractiveness on occupational prestige

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Abstract

Traditionally, social scientists have studied socio-economic inequalities mainly by looking at the impact of individuals' economic, cultural and social capital. Some scholars have recently argued that other types of resources, such as genetic and erotic capital, may also play a role in the processes that lead to the formation of social inequalities. Using a unique longitudinal dataset, the Wisconsin Longitudinal Study, this paper explores the impact of facial attractiveness on people's socio-economic standing over the life course. Methodologically, we employ a set of multilevel Growth Curve Models. Two findings clearly stand out from our analysis. Firstly, facial attractiveness does matter, both for men and women, and secondly, its impact is constant over the employment history. © 2012 International Sociological Association Research Committee 28 on Social Stratification and Mobility. Published by Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

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1. Studying social inequalities. New challenges to the dominant paradigm

The idea that social and economic outcomes in later life are influenced by the level of resources individuals start off with lies at the heart of sociological research into social inequalities. Sociologists have long acknowledged the role played by three different types of resources, commonly referred to as economic, cultural and social capital (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992; Bourdieu, 1986). This paradigm has informed the theoretic and

methodological framework of a plethora of empirical studies of social inequalities in occupational outcomes (see, for example, Blau & Duncan, 1967; Breen, 2004; Erikson & Goldthorpe, 1992; Shavit & Blossfeld, 1993; Shavit & Müller, 1998).

The dominant paradigm has recently been challenged by two groups of scholars who, drawing on different schools of thought, postulate that individuals' social outcomes are also influenced by what they refer to as genetic capital (amongst the others, Bearman, 2008; Guo, 2006, 2008; Lucchini et al., 2011; Pisati, 2008) and erotic capital (Hakim, 2010, 2011). The two groups of scholars argue that ignoring such resources altogether may lead to inaccurate conclusions regarding the processes that underlie the reproduction of social inequalities and call for the dominant paradigm to take into account (and integrate) the theoretic and methodological challenges posed by the new approaches; some authors even go further and call for a unification of the social and the

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natural sciences, see for example Daly and Wilson (1999), Kanazawa (2004), Tooby and Cosmides (1992), and Van den Berghe (1990).

The aim of the paper is to investigate the impact that non-traditional individual resources may have on socio-economic outcomes. More specifically, the paper explores the impact of facial attractiveness on people's socio-economic standing over the life course. It draws on Hakim's theory of erotic capital and a series of empirical papers (mainly carried out in economics) on how physical attractiveness influences people's labor market outcomes. Methodologically, we employ a set of multilevel models. We use, in particular, growth curve models (GCM) which are appropriate statistical techniques to model social change in a dynamic framework. Two findings clearly stand out from our analysis (i) facial attractiveness does matter, both for men and women, and (ii) its impact is stable over their employment history.

2. Beauty as one of the drivers of social inequalities

Erotic capital – like economic, cultural and social capital – is a resource that may play a role in granting individuals success in different domains of their life, both at any point in time and over the life course. As put by Hakim (2010), erotic capital (or erotic power) “is a somewhat different forth asset, previously overlooked, but just as important” (p. 500). It is a multi-faceted construct, “a combination of esthetic, visual, physical, social and sexual attractiveness to other members of your society, and especially to members of the opposite sex, in all social contexts” (p. 501). It is constituted by six key elements: beauty, sexual attractiveness, charm and charisma, liveliness, social presentation, and sexuality. In some cultures, reproductive capital may also be considered as a separate seventh asset.

Erotic capital has three peculiar features. First, erotic capital can be augmented through training, as it includes skills that can be learnt and developed (together with advantages that are fixed at birth). Second, although the role of erotic capital (or of some of its components) may vary across time and space, it is a scarce resource and is usually highly valued by all societies. In modern societies, Hakim argues, because of the increasing importance that people place on esthetic values, erotic capital has become as valuable as economic, social and cultural capital. Third, erotic capital is highly gendered as it is mainly possessed by women. Hakim (2010, p. 504) explains that “women have more erotic capital than men in most societies because they work harder at personal presentation and the performance of gender and

sexuality”. Women's advantage may not be fixed; however, sex differentials in modern societies may shrink as men devote more time to improving their physical appearance.

The theoretical claim that erotic capital is a fourth type of capital that influences people's life chances finds its empirical support in the research on the effects of physical attractiveness on social outcomes. Beauty may in fact be understood as the key stratifying component of erotic capital, as it is not amenable (or only at great cost). Research in this field has shown that attractiveness is associated with a wide range of socio-economic outcomes including happiness (Hamermesh & Abrevaya, 2011), mating (Fisman, Iyengar, Kamenica, & Simonson, 2006), group and family formation/dissolution (Castillo, Petrie, & Torero, 2010; Jones, 1995; Lundborg, Nystedt, & Lindgren, 2006; Mulford, Orbell, Shatto, & Stockard, 1998), electoral success (Belot, Bhaskar, & van de Ven, 2007; Berggren, Jordahl, & Poutvaara, 2007) and access to credit (Ravina, 2008).

People's physical attractiveness is also highly correlated with labor market outcomes, which are the focus of this study. Studies in this field have evaluated the impact of a number of markers of beauty (i) in the work place, (ii) in specific occupations (e.g., lawyers, escorts, academics, politicians, criminals, military cadets, executives), and (iii) on company productivity (an exhaustive review of the studies in this field can be found in Hamermesh, 2011, chaps. 3–5). The studies consistently found a positive association between beauty and the outcome variable of interest (except for being a criminal where being ugly pays off, *ceteris paribus*). The impact of markers of global physical attractiveness – most importantly, height, weight and body mass index – on labor market outcomes (mainly earnings) has been studied extensively. For example, Harper (2000) and Persico, Postlewaite, & Silverman (2004) found evidence for a height premium; Morris (2007) showed that obesity has a statistically significant and negative effect on employment in both males and females; Cawley (2004), Harper (2000) and Rooth (2009) qualified that the obesity penalty applies to women only. More recently, Glass, Haas, & Reither (2010) found that body mass does not have a strong *direct* effect on the careers of men and women. However, there is evidence for an *indirect* effect which would affect women's careers only (i.e., overweight women tend to invest less in education than normal weight women).

Studies that evaluate the impact of other markers of people's physical attractiveness, such as beauty, are

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