

Physical attractiveness: Uncertainty of the presumptive causal direction

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ABSTRACT

Research documents significant correlations between a person's physical attractiveness and non-appearance attributes of the person. That research is substantial in terms of quantity and quality. Scholarly journals representing marketing, management, psychology, and sociology, as well as many other disciplines, continue today to publish such studies that began in the late 1960s. That published research overwhelmingly finds higher and lower levels of physical attractiveness aligns respectively with non-appearance attributes of higher and lower value or desirability.

These researchers and journal editors seemingly, and rather explicitly, assume that a person's level of physical attractiveness — whether high or low — leads to, in other words causes, the personal characteristics of correspondingly high and low levels revealed in the collected, analyzed, and reported data. The research projects, their procedures, data, analyses, theories, and conclusions are scientifically sound and generally convincing. Accordingly, levels of certainty provided by pertinent statistically significant values minimize uncertainty that might exist concerning conclusions and presumptions about this causal relationship.

For example, achieving appearances of higher physical attractiveness in unison with achieving substantial success in an unrelated area of life occurs predictably; as explained in context of physical attractiveness phenomenon. Therefore, it can be ostensibly valid to conclude or presumed that greater physical attractiveness leads to (i.e., causes) greater success in work and beyond. However, the causal relationship here, as in many other applications of the research findings, might be actually opposite, whereby success causes appearances of higher physical attractiveness rather than vice versa.

Keywords: physical attractiveness, causal direction, uncertainty, appearance, looks

INTRODUCTION

Do appearances of higher physical attractiveness cause more success or, vice versa, does greater success cause appearances of higher physical attractiveness? Whichever the causal direction, does it matter? To begin, transfiguration of an individual's physical appearance does not happen without "rhyme or reason." Accordingly, it is reasonable to question and to urge future research to study whether the causal relationship between physical attractiveness and success might be in direction opposite to current, scientifically well-grounded, presumptions. While good looks certainly increases likelihood for success in life, success might well increase good looks and, actually, come first. In other words, it can be argued (but has not yet been investigated through solid empirical research) that a person's success in life can transfigure his or her appearance from low or average levels of physical attractiveness to treasured high levels. This argument challenges current notions that causal direction leads from, first, high physical attractiveness to, second, success in life. Yet, those who become very successful, frequently next become higher in physical attractiveness. It happens regardless whether the type of success aligns with prominence of wealth, power, political popularity, intellectual brilliance, artistic talent, sporting skill, or mass-media celebrity.

Whether accuracy about the causal direction in this relationship matters is well documented by substantial research (cf., Rhode 2010; Etcoff, 1999). Understanding the relationship between physical attractiveness and success, particularly the causal direction of this relationship, wields ramifications for decision-makers involved with business policy, marketing strategy, human resources personnel and practices, bottom line profit-loss finances of companies, consumer behavior, advertising campaigns, business ethics, and even government policy (*The Economist*, 2003). At the same time, it matters both financially and personally for the well-being of individuals (ABC Television Network News, 2005; *USA Today*, 2005; Buss 2001).

Workplace success represents one of the more immediate ramifications of a person's physical attractiveness (Saranow, 2004). The impact of a person's level of physical attractiveness in the workplace is far more than meets the eye (Ramachandran, 2005; Engemann and Owyang, 2005). Better-looking people tend to get ahead further and faster, receive higher incomes, and ultimately realize greater lifetime earnings than their less good-looking counterparts (Bennett, 2010; Cawley, 2004; Hamermesh and Biddle, 1994).

FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

Huge amounts are spent to enhance and retain a person's physical attractiveness. Companies do it, as well as individuals (*The Economist*, 2003). It is not unique to the United States. Analogous expenditures occur literally around the world by marketing organizations attempting to inform, promote, and persuade individuals about pertinent products and services and by individuals with receptive interests and motivations. In-turn, both sides of the equation generally benefit financially: the businesses selling these products and the individuals buying them.

Precise specific amounts spent in regard to good looks cannot be determined. Attempts to do so quickly confront difficulties surrounding applicable categorizations. Just one example, it is not financially workable to classify expenditures by fitness centers and their patrons when emphasis for some might focus more on good looks/physical attractiveness than on good health despite what may be claimed overtly. Even expenditures for beauty products pose problems of categorizations. Consider the task to accurately identify pertinent direct and indirect expenses at Procter & Gamble, Unilever, and Colgate-Palmolive for product R&D, advertising, and so forth. Nevertheless, the financial dimension expended in regard to physical attractiveness as a motivator for consumers and accordingly as opportunities for related companies can be glimpsed by multiplying the number of people, men and women, times a reasonable estimate of average expenditures by individuals. One such indicator for average expenditures by individuals, editors at *Newsweek* magazine in 2010 calculated that the average woman spends \$449,127 over her life on hair, face, body, and hands/feet (Ammah-Tagoe, 2010).

Whatever the actual financial amounts spent by companies and individuals for purposes, products, and services to enhance or retain physical attractiveness, it is reasonable to summarize that the total amounts within every country range from substantial to huge. While these amounts and the connected importance placed on the physical attractiveness of individuals might be argued as excessive, reasonable, unreasonable, justified, or unjustified, the fact is that people the world-over overwhelmingly consider goods looks to be important and spend their financial resources accordingly.

CONNECTION BETWEEN GOOD LOOKS AND GOOD FORTUNE

In terms of “ROI” (return on investment), it certainly appears that expenditures in pursuit of higher physical attractiveness pays off both for companies manufacturing, marketing, and distributing related products and services, and for individuals consuming these items. Empirical research data as well as anecdotal observations confirm that throughout populations, individuals of higher physical attractiveness are more successful. Those data and observations generally presume that higher physical attractiveness leads to (i.e., causes) more success. Certainly, findings from substantial scientific research conducted in many fields document that people of higher physical attractiveness are more successful (Bennett, 2010; Watkins and Johnston, 2000).

For companies/employers, it is legal to differentiate/discriminate based on a person's physical attractiveness, if their actions do not conflict with personal factors protected by federal law (Greenhouse, 2003). However, sentiment about current legalities certainly exists to the contrary (*U. S. News & World Report*, 1983; *U. S. News & World Report*, 1976) More recently, Stanford Law School professor Deborah Rhode argues in her 2010 published book (*The Beauty Bias: The Injustice of Appearance in Life and Law*) that political-legislation policy makers should pass laws prohibiting all employment decisions based on physical attractiveness (Rhode, 2010). Consistent with such sentiments, some states and some individuals have attempted to pass laws that prohibit differentiation or discrimination based on physical attractiveness, but proving those cases in a court of law have proven very difficult and passing of related laws have been slow (Ofgang, 2003).

Bottom line finances indicate that utilizing research knowledge concerning physical attractiveness phenomenon is advantageous for companies/employers (Schoenberger, 1997). Nevertheless, ethical issues arise (McGinn, 2009; Patzer, 2007). To do so can be problematic, at least to do so publicly (Chavez, 2004; Associated Press, 2004; *USA Today*, 2004; Cassidy, 2003; Biddle and Hamermesh, 1998). Despite this particular knowledge generated by solid scientific research, the realities discomfort many. In addition, codes of ethics generally rule out actions that cause mental harm. Furthermore, inflammatory opposition can arise from some customers, some potential customers, and some members of the public. Still other complications and complexities can arise, as illustrated by a current lawsuit against Citibank file in court by the plaintiff, Debralee Lorenzana (Gregorian, 2010). She alleges that Citibank fired her in 2010 from her bank position in New York City because she was too good looking.

CHALLENGING THE STATUS QUO

Challenging the status quo concerning the connection, specifically the causal direction, between physical attractiveness of individuals and success of individuals can begin here by questioning rather conventional wisdom generalized from solid empirical research. The base or body of research findings from which these generalizations tend to be made deals with what has been well-documented through solid empirical research investigating dimensions of “physical attractiveness phenomenon.” What is not similarly known or similarly well-documented are the generalizations that occur based on those research findings. Specifically, in this case, whether good looks cause good fortune or whether good fortune, however obtained, cause good looks. Future solid empirical research that might answer this causal direction question could yield substantial financial dividends to companies and individuals who now assume differently and spend their financial resources accordingly.

Data are conclusive, whether collected through scientific research or anecdotal observation. Overall, individuals of higher physical attractiveness are more successful throughout life. Despite assumptions about causal direction, it is currently not conclusive nor even really addressed by existing research whether possessing higher or lower physical attractiveness leads to (i.e., causes) greater or lesser success, respectively. Or, stated differently, might reality be the opposite, whereby success in life causes physical attractiveness rather than vice versa? And, if so, that question warrants research investigation accordingly.

PHYSICAL ATTRACTIVENESS PHENOMENON

Sometimes termed lookism, physical attractiveness phenomenon encompasses the reality that people behave toward individuals in ways strongly biased by their physical attractiveness (Patzer 2008; Etcoff, 1999). The bias strongly favors higher physical attractiveness and disfavors lower physical attractiveness (Berscheid and Walster, 1972; Dion, Berscheid, and Walster, 1972). This phenomenon is powerful, pervasive, and often unrecognized or denied (Patzer 2006). It impacts every individual—regardless of sex—around the world, ranging from the smallest towns to the largest cities, and ranging from the least developed countries to the most developed. In regards to this phenomenon,

instantly upon sight, people consciously and subconsciously assess the physical attractiveness dimension(s) of a person's appearance.

Characteristics of physical attractiveness include the truism that all people inherit and alter their physical attractiveness, and uncontrollable changes transpire accidentally as well as naturally during a long lifetime. Furthermore, many complex interdependent factors, physical and non-physical, determine its perceived level. For research purposes, measures about how pleasing someone looks, can be used to operationally define physical attractiveness.

With multi-cultural and multi-disciplinary collective expertise, researchers formally study the vast matter of physical attractiveness. In varied locations with varied methodologies, scholars conduct this research in fields literally from A to Z, anthropology to zoology, with the most research conducted in subfields of psychology. These focused investigations began in earnest more than forty years ago, continue today, and will carry on far into the future.

Although particular fashions and fads vary between groups of people, physical attractiveness phenomenon itself does not vary. Data from diverse published research projects conducted through scientifically sound procedures and standards provide a robust inventory of consistent results regardless of culture, country, or time in history. Moreover, prior findings combined with ongoing research compose a robust, ever-increasing, understanding about physical attractiveness phenomenon.

Process

A circular four-stage process rationally conceptualizes physical attractiveness phenomenon. Throughout this entire process, a person's physical attractiveness exerts significant influence. Within the first stage, it serves as a multifaceted informational cue. Although this stage represents mostly a visual event, all senses affect judgment that determines physical attractiveness. Even hearing or reading about a person's physical attractiveness initiates this process sight unseen.

The second and third stages reflect mental processing that immediately follows the first stage when seeing another person's physical attractiveness. At the second stage of this process, people infer extensive information about the observed person, which includes assumptions and expectations regarding tangible and intangible traits. These inferences transition into the third stage in which people crystallize their respective attitudes toward the person and their intended behavior toward him or her. Conscious or not conscious of their thinking within these second and third cognitive processing stages, people rarely acknowledge the elaborateness of their attitudes and intentions. The fourth stage culminates the process with consequences determined by the person's level of physical attractiveness. These consequences in-turn continue the process forward by reinforcing and promulgating the informational cue progression that begins at the first stage.

Consequences

First, scientific research documents that physical attractiveness dominates among the physical features that compose the appearance of a person. Second, overall consequences identified by the research prove higher physical attractiveness to be advantageous and lower physical attractiveness to be disadvantageous. This benefits-detriments pattern occurs with relatively few exceptions.

The importance that a person's physical attractiveness holds continues today and is projected to continue in the future. Despite conventional thought sometimes to the contrary, it is not new. Scholars and scientists identified with diverse disciplines and diverse cultures have well-documented the long-standing importance of physical attractiveness in the lives of societies and individuals. In fact, in 2009, several hundred contributing authors from around the world, representing an affluence of disciplines again expressed concurrence about physical attractiveness and physical attractiveness phenomenon, this time throughout a massive a book titled, *100,000 Years of Beauty* (Azoulay and Frioux, 2009). That scholarly, five-volume tome published in France amassed directly related insights and perspectives within often-disparate cultures and civilizations over the past 100,000 years to present, with consistent conclusions that physical attractiveness has always exerted significant importance in societies and in the lives of those individuals.

The effects begin early and span the timeline of a person's life. Consequences due to a person's level of physical attractiveness differ literally from birth to death. At birth, children of higher physical attractiveness, described at this age as more cute, are touched more, held more, and spoken to more. Later, throughout childhood school years, better-looking children experience preferential treatment from all children, teachers, parents, and adults regardless of familial relationship. In addition, along with changing attitudes by parents and society combined with ongoing medical advancements, current trends project an increasing impact on individuals even before birth.

Contrasting beneficial-detrimental experiences extend throughout adulthood. For example, employers are more likely to hire job applicants of higher physical attractiveness and promote faster their better-looking employees. During employment, people in all types of jobs, positions, and industries receive larger or smaller incomes in correlation with their higher or lower physical attractiveness. These wage differences can seem small at a particular moment, but they compound to substantial income inequities over the long term. Throughout a 40-year working career, these percentages on average translate into cumulative differences of more than two hundred thousand United States dollars or the equivalent amount in another country's currency.

INCREASING PHYSICAL ATTRACTIVENESS VIA INCREASING SUCCESS

Despite intuitive appeal to conclude that higher levels of physical attractiveness lead to, or cause, higher levels of fortune, what follows here is context for how the reverse direction might occur. It is this context that urges and warrants a call for future solid empirical research to study probabilities for this causal relationship direction. To begin, physical attractiveness and personal success interrelate complexly. Success in areas unrelated to looks can actually produce greater physical attractiveness when it

serves as a force that transfigures related perceptions. More often than not, those who achieve the best success in life are in-turn then viewed to be the best looking. Exceptions to the rule exist, but as with nearly all rules, these exceptions do not terminate or disprove this rule.

Attitudes, beliefs, and perceptions that equate the best things in life with beauty underlie the transfiguration when a successful person next becomes a physically beautiful person. Interrelated, success commonly elevates a person's self-image, as well as the image seen in the eyes of others, which further contributes favorably to judgments that determine physical beauty. Ultimately, the beauty newly assigned to a newly successful person reflects an underlying succession. People consider the now highly valued person, now to embody physical beauty. Features of his or her physical appearance then accordingly become valued standards of physical attractiveness. Congruent with this analysis, mass media intermittingly reports specific face and body features of movie superstars that cosmetic surgery patients most request.

Attendant adornments, accouterments, and surroundings reinforce and enhance the newly perceived physical beauty of successful people. Interwoven with their increasing renown, these people typically enhance their looks with trappings characteristically aligned with successful and beautiful people. These include desired clothes, cosmetics, and jewelry. In fact, findings from formal research confirm that adding or subtracting such artifacts and settings affect a person's physical attractiveness accordingly. For instance, when highly successful individuals remove themselves even temporarily from their elevated environments their physical attractiveness often quickly decreases in the eyes of everyday people.

The effect of elevated environments on perceived physical beauty of successful people can be readily glimpsed rather first-hand. Consider situations in which people have seen up-close and in-person, entertainment celebrities or major elected politicians who venture publicly into the general population. These occasions frequently illustrate that judgments can decline suddenly about a person's overall physical attractiveness as well as views of the features that compose overall beauty. When seeing these media stars face-to-face in these less elevated circumstances, thoughts and comments by non-famous individuals frequently quickly express how much less physically attractive the celebrity looks to be in-person or how much shorter he or she looks in-person than had been thought according to their appearance on television or in movies and magazines.

CONCLUSION

Do appearances of higher physical attractiveness cause more success or, vice versa, does greater success cause appearances of higher physical attractiveness? Existing published research has not yet determined definitely the answer to this question of causal direction. On the other hand, the causal direction has been shown to matter. Empirical research data as well as anecdotal data about consumer behavior, business enterprises, individual successes and failures, and society overall, have answered definitely the great importance placed upon a person's physical attractiveness throughout the related research and throughout related the lives of individuals.

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