Physical Attractiveness Bias in Hiring: What Is Beautiful Is Good

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The bias in favor of physically attractive people is robust, with attractive people being perceived as more sociable, happier and more successful than unattractive people (Dion, Berscheid & Walster, 1972; Eagly, Ashmore, Makhijani & Longo, 1991; Hatfield & Sprecher, 1986; Watkins & Johnston, 2000). Attractiveness biases have been demonstrated in such different areas as teacher judgments of students (Clifford & Walster, 1973), voter preferences for political candidates (Efran & Patterson, 1974) and jury judgments in simulated trials (Efran, 1974). Recently, Smith, McIntosh and Bazzini (1999) investigated the "beauty is goodness" stereotype in U.S. films and found that attractive characters were portrayed more favorably than unattractive characters on multiple dimensions across a random sample drawn from five decades of top-grossing films. The authors also found that participants watching a biased film (level of beauty and gender stereotyping) subsequently showed greater favoritism toward an attractive graduate school candidate than participants watching a less biased film. In the area of employment decision making, attractiveness also influences interviewers' judgments of job applicants (Watkins & Johnston, 2000).

What Is Beautiful Is Good

In our daily lives, we often see that positions with a high degree of public exposure (e.g., television news anchors) are filled by attractive people. It has commonly been assumed that for some positions, such as salespeople, being attractive may affect the bottom line (McElroy & DeCarol, 1999). However, a survey of the research examining physical attractiveness (PA) bias suggests that applicant physical attractiveness may influence the employment process even for positions that are not considered high-exposure positions (Dipboye, Arvey & Terpstra, 1977; Dipboye, Fromkin & Wiback, 1975; Cash, Gillen & Burns, 1977; Watkins & Johnston, 2000). There is considerable empirical evidence that physical attractiveness impacts employment decision making, with the result that the more attractive an individual, the greater the likelihood that that person will be hired (Watkins & Johnston, 2000). This generalization is known as the "what is beautiful is good" stereotype (Dion, Berscheid & Walster, 1972). Research examining attractiveness bias in hiring decisions is important because of the extensive use of subjective appraisals in employment decision making. Given the legislation prohibiting employment discrimination based on non-job-related factors such as race, gender, ethnicity, disability and age, it is interesting that there is no legislation regarding physical attractiveness (Watkins & Johnston, 2000). Making hiring decisions based on non-job-related factors is detrimental to the overall organizational performance.

When Beauty Is Beastly

While the most common finding in the selection literature is that unattractive applicants are rated less favorably than attractive applicants, some studies have results counter to the "beautiful is good" hypothesis. Some evidence suggests that when the position being applied for is traditionally filled by a male, the reverse of the typical bias is found for female applicants: Attractive females are evaluated less favorably than unattractive females. Heilman and Saruwatari (1979) labeled this the "beauty is beastly" effect. Cash, Gillen and Burns (1977) also demonstrated the "beauty is beastly" effect when they had professional personnel consultants evaluate resumes for traditionally masculine, feminine and neutral jobs. For neutral jobs, attractive applicants were preferred over unattractive applicants. Attractive applicants were also rated as more qualified than unattractive applicants when applying for sex-role-congruent employment (i.e., masculine jobs for males and feminine jobs for females). Heilman and Saruwatari (1979) asked college students to rate resumes (which included a photograph) of applicants for one of two jobs, a traditionally male managerial job and a traditionally female non-managerial job. Subjects were told that all applicants had recently graduated and had been pre-screened on the basis of educational and background qualifications. An examination of the results showed that attractiveness consistently was an advantage for male applicants but was an advantage only for females seeking traditionally female jobs. Attractive females were perceived as more feminine than unattractive females and were therefore at a disadvantage when seeking a job that traditionally required masculine characteristics.

The "beauty is beastly" effect also has been found in a performance appraisal context (Heilman & Stopeck, 1985a, 1985b). Dawn Plumitallo, a doctoral student, and I conducted a study to look at attractiveness bias in a performance appraisal situation. Bank supervisors read a memo describing a problem with an employee (male or female) who was portrayed as attractive, unattractive or average. Supervisors were asked to assist in disciplining this employee. We found that being attractive was a handicap in the evaluation of negative performance (Shahani & Plumitallo, 1993). Supervisors were more likely to perceive the attractive employee as failing

because of a lack of effort, whereas unattractive employees were perceived to fail because of bad luck. It seems that unattractive applicants may fare better when found guilty of misbehavior. This has been shown in some previous research with attractive people being perceived as having greater freedom from external influence than less attractive people (Miller, 1970; Rich, 1975) and therefore being held more accountable for their own poor performance. The bias operated similarly for male and female employees.

The evidence that attractiveness is an advantage for male but not for female interviewees when the job is traditionally male has been mostly found in laboratory research. There are, however, three typical aspects of laboratory research that limit the generalizability of these findings (Shahani, Dipboye & Gehrlein, 1993). First, most laboratory research has relied on photographs rather than face-to-face interviews. The typical laboratory study has also used a highly limited sample of stimuli, with only one or two photographs being used to manipulate attractiveness (Fontenelle, Phillips & Lane, 1985). A final limitation of the typical laboratory study is that it has involved evaluations of hypothetical applicants rather than real workplace judgments and decisions. Perhaps attractiveness effects are diminished when interviewers anticipate that their judgments will have a significant impact on applicants (Shahani, Dipboye & Gehrlein, 1993).

Shahani, Dipboye and Gehrlein (1993) conducted one of the first field studies to examine the "beauty is beastly" bias within the context of selection decision making in college admissions. Relationships were explored between interviewer evaluations of college applicants and academic credentials, physical attractiveness, sex and academic majors of applicants. Applicants to a private university were required to submit a photograph along with their application folders. Photographs of 506 randomly selected applicants were rated on attractiveness. Academic majors were classified as liberal arts (traditionally female) and science and engineering (traditionally male). Two criterion variables were examined: interviewer evaluations and the final admissions decision. Attractiveness was significantly and positively correlated with both the interviewer evaluation as well as the final admissions decision. In examining interviewer evaluations, an interesting finding was the relationship between applicant gender, attractiveness and high school rank. For males, higher rank was associated with higher interview scores regardless of attractiveness. For unattractive women, results were similar. However, for attractive women, interview scores were always high regardless of rank. Although there was evidence of attractiveness bias in interviewer judgments, the results were different when examining the overall admissions decision. Although attractiveness was significantly and positively correlated with the admissions decision, when controlling for academic credentials (SAT, high school rank), attractiveness did not predict the overall admissions decision. There was no support for the "beauty is beastly" bias in this study. There was no relationship between applicant physical attractiveness, gender and the academic major they were applying for. Finally, Shahani et al. (1993) supported the external validity of using photographs in the study of attractiveness bias because they found similar effect sizes in this study as had previously been found in laboratory studies.

In another study (Musumeci & Shahani, 1996) examining the "beauty is beastly" effect, 207 professionals (96 marketing professionals from a consumer products company and 111 secondary school teachers) examined applicant suitability for an entry-level marketing position. Applicant attractiveness and gender were manipulated. Attractiveness was found to impact evaluations of applicant suitability for hire, promotability and starting salary. The "beautiful is good" effect for physically attractive applicants was supported. There was no support for the "beauty is beastly" effect. Male and female entry-level marketing professionals benefited equally from attractiveness. Another recent study (Podratz & Dipboye, 2002) also did not find support for the "beauty is beastly" effect. In summary, examination of the hiring literature reveals greater support for the "beautiful is good" stereotype, with less support for the "beauty is beastly" effect.

Examples of Photographs Used in the Attractiveness Research

The Physical Attractiveness Stereotype in Different Cultures

Most of the research examining the physical attractiveness stereotype has been conducted in Western societies, predominantly the United States and Canada. In these times of increased globalization of business, it is important to consider the generality of this research to people of different cultures. It has been hypothesized that physical attractiveness should have a greater influence in societies that emphasize distinctive and differentiated personal

identity (Dion, Pak & Dion, 1990). Some research has been conducted examining the general physical attractiveness stereotype (what is beautiful is good), which found general support for the PA bias even in cultures that are collectivist, where you might expect less of this bias (Dion, Pak & Dion, 1990;

Examples of Photographs Used in the Attractiveness Research

Chen, Shaffer & Wu, 1997; Wheeler & Kim, 1997; Shaffer, Crepaz & Sun, 2000). Recently, a student in our M.A. program and I conducted a study to examine the influence of physical attractiveness on hiring decisions in two very different cultures, namely the United States and India. The United States is considered to be an extremely individualistic culture, whereas India is considered to be a collectivistic culture. Data was collected from 216 Indian students and 121 American students. Applicant gender and attractiveness were manipulated via photographs. Participants were asked to review applicant resumes and a job description for a department head of children's toys (gender neutral job) and then to evaluate the applicants' qualifications, likelihood of being hired, and the salary they would be awarded. Equivalent pictures and resumes were used for the Indian and American samples. Each participant reviewed one resume and saw a picture of either an attractive or unattractive male or female applicant. In analyzing the data for the Indian students, physical attractiveness was not found to affect ratings of qualifications or likelihood of hiring; however, there was an effect on the salary rating. Higher salaries were offered to attractive applicants. There were no effects for applicant attractiveness or gender on the ratings of qualifications, likelihood of being hired, and salary offered by American students. One reason for the relatively weak effects for attractiveness in this study could be that each participant reviewed only one applicant and made hiring decisions on only one applicant. In the real world, interviewers review many resumes and interview many applicants before making a hiring decision. To overcome the limitations of this study, we are currently collecting data in India and the United States, where each participant is being asked to review several candidates and make hiring decisions for each. Each participant will review male and female, attractive and unattractive applicants. We look forward to analyzing that data in the very near future.

Conclusions

A review of the literature supports the notion that being physically attractive is an advantage when applying for a job. There is little support for the "beauty is beastly" effect. The "what is beautiful is good" bias seems fairly universal and has been found in a variety of different cultures. Since it is not fair to base hiring decisions on non-job-related factors like attractiveness, training hiring managers to avoid this bias is one way to reduce such inequity.

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Comila Shahani-Denning's current research and consulting interests include the measurement and understanding of customer service; the evaluation of training programs; understanding the underlying nature of time management; and the physical attractiveness bias and role of the interview in employee selection, from which this article is derived.

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Professor Shahani-Denning has an extensive list of publications and presentations relating to her research and professional interests, including the findings of research she conducted concerning employee and customer perceptions of service quality in India and time management issues as they pertain to organizations based in India.

Professor Shahani-Denning earned a B.A. from St. Xavier's College (Bombay, India) and an M.A. and Ph.D. from Rice University. While pursuing her graduate studies, she served as a consultant to Rice University's Office of Admissions, aiding in the development and modification of the interview procedures for selection of undergraduate students. She also taught undergraduate courses at Rice University.

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