

BEAUTY AND THE LABOR MARKET: AN ARTICLE CRITIQUE ON HEMERMESH AND BIDDLE'S "BEAUTY AND THE LABOUR MARKET"

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Article Summary

Informal observation has long supported the supposition that physical beauty or handsomeness can pay dividends in the workplace irrespective of the type of employment. In *Beauty and the Labor Market*, the authors Hamermesh and Biddle attempt to quantify the degree to which physical beauty or the quality that the general public might ascribe to being good looking in terms of actual earnings. Hamermesh and Biddle begin their research by discussing the most significant existing literature that has examined this issue. One interesting point that they clarify at the outset of their argument is to make the case that although a significant amount of research has been conducted on this general topic, relatively little research has been undertaken in this topic that examines how the shifting standards of beauty have affected earnings of those deemed good looking or not good looking over time (1175). While this might seem like an obvious caveat to anyone doing research in this area, apparently this significant variable has not been adequately factored in previous research. In examining how physical looks have affected earnings of individuals the authors of this research project attempt to eliminate or account for all possible variations in earnings by controlling for other factors, such as tenure and education,

through regression analysis (1180). One interesting outcome of these authors' research is that there is an absence of difference by gender statistically speaking which is perhaps the inverse of common beliefs, given that women are often deemed to have distinct advantages if they are beautiful or pretty. The overall result of the study is that the authors have identified a 5 to 10% penalty in total earnings for individuals who are deemed not good looking.

Lessons Learned

This research paper revealed some interesting observations about how physical attractiveness can impact an individual's employment. While many people automatically assume good looking women have a distinct advantage in the workplace, many of these same people might not realize that males actually have the same advantage. These authors made a host of important revelations regarding physical attractiveness and professional employment but one important assertion is that individuals who are not deemed good looking must proactively compensate for their unattractiveness through other means such as elevating their education or training qualifications or in burnishing their upbringing and professional background in some regard (Hamermesh & Biddle 1186). Unfortunately, if an individual is not blessed with what would

be commonly considered classical good looks then they are, in a sense, permanently handicapped from a professional perspective. The primary conclusion of these authors seems to be that the labor market, irrespective of region or locale, does in fact reward physical attractiveness in terms of real wages. These results have a very real impact on quality of life issues as well as productivity in the workplace because employees who are penalized not based on actual merit but purely on physical appearance may not consciously be aware of their loss of income but the lower wages would negatively impact productivity and overall output.

Article Critique

The researchers in this article have presented a fairly objective argument for establishing that not only are informal observations regarding the advantages of physical beauty in the workplace accurate but, even more importantly, they can be academically proven. However, one unique fault with the methodology in this research project is the subjective necessity of relying on a distinctly subjective determinant of what constitutes beauty:

The second method relies on the opinions of eight adults with at least one year of full-time labor-market experience who were asked to rate each of the three-digit occupations on a three-point scale: 0, looks are probably not important; 1, looks might be important, and 2, looks are definitely important. (Hamermesh & Biddle 1189)

While much of this subjective determination of beauty upon which this research project relies might be necessary, it is one of its weakest points. Other research and commentary in the field of

physical beauty and good looks has revealed that there are quantifiable measures that can be, at least partially, relied on to define what constitutes beauty in a very real sense. For example, Von Drehle writes that professionals who regularly work with what would be considered beautiful or good looking people such as reconstructive surgeons have asserted that many studies support their contention that what societies commonly term beautiful are “highly symmetrical” features (par.5). Thus, there does exist some basis for which the researchers, Hamermesh and Biddle, could have moved to actually quantify what beautiful or good looking actually means. The fact that such a quantifiable paradigm can not only be configured but has been created is proof that these researchers missed an opportunity to provide even further factual evidence regarding their assertion that beauty or physical attractiveness affects real incomes.

The paradigm that could have been altered or adjusted for this research project is based on the symmetry of the human features which is proven to be at the foundation of commonly accepted physical attractiveness. This paradigm is outlined below:

The combined width of the two upper front teeth in a model-perfect smile is 1.618 times the height of each tooth... he generated a number of shapes using key facial features as endpoints all based on the 1:1.618 ratio...He called the finished product his... “phi mask.” The real test came when he assembled hundreds of pictures of acclaimed beauties...His “mask” fit...onto face after face after face (Von Drehle pars.12-15)

This working paradigm of classical beauty of the female face might not be effective in itself for male employees but

its principles could easily have been adapted to work for a male population.

Certainly this model could have been used to determine how close to the ideal of physical beauty an employee was in determining actual beauty or good looking determinants for the purpose of this study. It would have been useful to complete the study as it is but to utilize such a quantifiable metric as a method to control for subjective interference on the part of the employees utilized to qualify someone else's status as good looking or not good looking. This shortcoming regarding the research project's ability to adequately quantify or to develop an objective means to quantify beauty or attractiveness is even more striking considering other academic research projects have been better able to develop such metrics. For example, Sara Kimmel and James Mahalik, in *Measuring Masculine Body Ideal Distress: Development of a Measure*, were able to do just that which is to create a quantifiable and repeatable metric that allowed them to determine how far off the

ideal physical form individuals were relative to their current physical state. Some of these authors' metrics could easily have been incorporated into Hamermesh and Biddle's research project which would have introduced substantially more academic objectivity into a field of research that can be highly problematic.

Works Cited

Hamermesh, Daniel and Jeff Biddle. "Beauty and the Labor Market." *The American Economic Review*, Dec.(1994): pp.1174-1194.

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Von Drehle, David. "Looking Good: Our Obsession with Physical Appearance May not be so Shallow, After All." *The Washington Post*, Nov.12(2006) W.14.