

The problem with being pretty

October 24 2017

While good-looking people are generally believed to receive more favorable treatment in the hiring process, when it comes to applying for less desirable jobs, such as those with low pay or uninteresting work, attractiveness may be a liability, according to research published by the American Psychological Association.

"Our research suggests that attractive people may be discriminated against in selection for relatively less desirable jobs," said lead author Margaret Lee, a doctoral candidate at the London Business School. "This stands in contrast to a large body of research that concluded that attractiveness, by and large, helps candidates in the selection process."

The research was published in the *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*.

Lee and her colleagues conducted a series of four experiments involving more than 750 participants, including university students and managers who make hiring decisions in the real world. Participants were shown profiles of two potential job candidates that included photos, one attractive and one unattractive (the photos were vetted by previous research to test attractiveness). The participants were then asked a series of questions designed to measure their perceptions of the job candidates and, in three of the experiments, whether they would hire these candidates for a less-than-desirable job (e.g., warehouse worker, housekeeper, customer service representative) or a more desirable job (e.g., manager, project director, IT internship).

In all three experiments where they were asked, participants were significantly less likely to hire the attractive candidate for the less desirable job and more likely to hire the attractive candidate for the more desirable job.

"We found that participants perceived attractive individuals to feel more entitled to good outcomes than unattractive individuals, and that attractive individuals were predicted to be less satisfied with an undesirable job than an unattractive person," said Lee. "In the selection [decision](#) for an undesirable job, decision makers were more likely to choose the unattractive individual over the attractive individual. We found this effect to occur even with hiring managers."

The findings were surprising because, based on prior research, the prediction would be that decision makers select the attractive candidate no matter the position, according to Lee.

"The most interesting part of our findings is that [decision makers](#) take into consideration others' assumed aspirations in their decisions," said co-author Madan Pillutla, PhD, also of the London Business School.

"Because participants thought that attractive individuals would want better outcomes, and therefore participants predicted that attractive individuals would be less satisfied, they reversed their discrimination pattern and favored unattractive candidates when selecting for a less desirable job."

This research suggests that the taken-for-granted view that attractive candidates are favored when applying for jobs might be limited to high-level jobs that were the predominant focus of past research, according to Pillutla. Therefore, organizations and policymakers may need to implement different measures from those assumed by past work if they are to curb discrimination in the [hiring process](#), he said.

More information: psycnet.apa.org/doiLanding?doi=10.1037%2Fpspi0000114

Provided by American Psychological Association

Citation: The problem with being pretty (2017, October 24) retrieved 12 May 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2017-10-problem-pretty.html>

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