

Beautiful people earn more... and are moreover happier

Bruno Frey, Jana Gallus 21 March 2012

The world appears to be unfair. Those who are prettier earn a higher salary and are also happier. This column argues it is still not hopeless for those less blessed with looks. Appropriate clothing, hairstyles, and good teeth can help, as can choosing a profession where expertise is clearly central and beauty of less importance.

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The world appears to be unfair. Those who are prettier are more successful in the labour market and therewith earn a higher salary. On the marriage market, too, the beautiful succeed more easily than those who are not that blessed with their looks. These properties have recently been termed "erotic capital", to add to the economic, cultural, human and social capitals. Together, they crucially determine success in the economic sector. And as if this were not enough, happiness research now shows that beautiful people are also happier.

But what is beauty?

We have all learned that beauty is in the eye of the beholder. Although this has much truth to it, studies by social psychologists have shown that there is a surprisingly high consistency in the judgements about who is more, and who is less, beautiful. It is difficult to agree on a definition of which face is beautiful. Yet, beauty is empirically measurable (Hamermesh 2011). One could, for example, start out from a certain measure of symmetry. Typically, though, respondents are directly asked for their evaluation, whereby a five-tiered scale is employed. According to a US survey that was conducted in the 1970s, the distribution in Table 1 holds.

Table 1. The distribution of beauty

	Men	Women
"strikingly handsome or beautiful"	3%	2%
"good-looking (above average for age and sex)"	31%	27%
"average looks for age and sex"	51%	59%
"quite plain (below average for age and sex)"	13%	11%
"homely"	2%	1%

Other studies show a similar outcome. About one third of the people are judged "good-looking" or even "handsome or beautiful", which is a pleasing result. Only a very small share is deemed unattractive. Also noteworthy is the negligible difference between the sexes. Women are not considered more beautiful from the outset. This broad consensus on beauty holds for economically developed countries at a given point in time. There are differences between cultures, but these are smaller than one might assume.

The presented findings refer to the evaluation of the face, which is of paramount importance for the assessment of a person's looks. Weight and height are also a determinants. This is not surprising for any art lover – the women painted by Rubens do not correspond to the current ideal of beauty.



Bruno Frey

Permanent Visiting Professor,
University of Basel.



Jana Gallus

Postdoctoral Researcher in the
Department of Economics,
University of Zurich

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At other times, though, artists have already painted people whose looks correspond to the present concepts of beauty. One need only think of Dürer's and Cranach's representations of Adam and Eve, or Botticelli's Judgement of Paris.

As also becomes obvious when looking at these paintings, youth and beauty are closely correlated. This can be explained by taking recourse to sociobiological arguments. It is evolutionarily advantageous if beauty stimulates the reproductive capacity, which is at its height during our youth. Yet, it could be questioned whether this remains beneficial in an era of a rapidly growing world population.

The effect on income and wealth

The importance of beauty on the labour market is empirically measurable. For the US, Hamermesh has calculated that the 30% of women who were judged "strikingly beautiful" or "good-looking" had an income exceeding that of comparable women who were deemed less beautiful by 8%, on average. The effect of good looks was a bit smaller for men, amounting to 4%. Women who were rated "quite plain" and "homely" received an income that was 4% lower; men in the corresponding categories even earned 13% less, on average. Beauty also affects wealth in an indirect way, i.e. via the marriage market. The partners of unappealing people earn less, on average, than those of better-looking ones. Furthermore, it is easier for attractive people to get loans – although they are less likely to pay them back (*The Economist* 2011).

The effect on wellbeing

It is often assumed that beautiful people might be more successful in the labour market, but that they are still less happy. One thinks of beauty queens who overestimate their position and lose touch with reality, or of film stars who are praised for their looks but are apparently unhappy and who like to publicly reveal this.

Empirical research draws a different conclusion. Beautiful people are happier than less good-looking ones. Studies from the field of psychology (e.g. Diener et al. 1995) find a significant positive correlation between physical attractiveness and subjective wellbeing. Using datasets from the UK, Germany, Canada and the US, Hamermesh suggests there is a direct effect of beauty on individual wellbeing, which is stronger for women than for men. As is commonly done in modern studies on the subject, happiness is captured with the question: "Generally speaking, how satisfied are you with the life you lead?" (e.g. Frey 2010). Among the most good-looking third of people, 55% assert that they are satisfied with their lives. Compared to this, only 45% of those who are the least good-looking give this answer. Since beauty simultaneously increases income and the chances on the marriage market, the total impact of beauty on happiness is even higher. This effect is further reinforced by the fact that beautiful people generally find it easier to engage in new social relationships.

What are the remedies?

Regarding the impact of beauty in the labour market, some have proposed to extend anti-discrimination laws from sex and race to looks. Since this seems both impracticable and debatable, we suggest remedies at the individual level. There are four dimensions on which those who are not blessed with good looks can, and do, compensate for this. First, it has to be emphasised that intelligence and talent often more than compensate for average or below-average looks, on the labour market as well as on the marriage market. In most cases, this applies equally to a good education, although looks have a bigger effect on earnings than education (*The Economist* 2011).

Second, appropriate clothing, hairstyles and good manners can substantially improve appearance and the impression one gives to others. Likewise, good teeth can have a positive effect on labour-market outcomes. This is important because teeth, unlike one's looks in general, can be fixed. As concerns plastic surgery, the costs have to be carefully weighed against the benefits. According to Hamermesh, many such operations only have a small impact.

Third, one can choose a profession where expertise is clearly central while beauty is of secondary importance. One should, for example, opt to become an astrophysicist or a radio anchorwoman, where the attractiveness of the voice counts, rather than an actor, lawyer, financial advisor, or top manager. In the age of television, this even applies to the profession of politician. A study of the elections for the German Parliament in 2002 found that candidates who were deemed better-looking achieved a proportion of the vote that was considerably higher, which made it more likely for them to be elected (Klein and Rosar 2005). In Finland, good looks were shown to have an even bigger effect in politics (Berggren et al. 2010). Even in the serious field of economics, beauty seems to matter. Hamermesh found that attractive people had better chances when running for office in the American Economic Association.

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Fourth, economic fortune and power attract the opposite sex. They can thus serve as compensation for lack of beauty. This explains why a man like Onassis could successfully court two of the most desired women of their time – Maria Callas and Jacqueline Kennedy.

Editor's Note: A similar article was published on [Oekonomienstimme](#) on 15 December 2011.

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