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The Beautiful and the Damned: Exploring the Negative Side of Masculine Attractiveness in Hiring Situations

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Abstract

Although attractiveness can be an asset in many different situations, in some cases, attractiveness can produce negative outcomes in the workplace, which is known as the “beauty is beastly” effect (Heilman & Saruwatari, 1979). This study sought to explore this effect among men in hypothetical hiring decisions using two photos of men that varied in perceived attractiveness. Two-Way ANOVA results showed that the male attractive candidate was rated less favorably among male participant-raters while the average candidate received higher ratings from same-gender participants ($F[1, 125] = 8.05, p = .005, \eta^2 = .061$). These findings highlight the possibility of male same-gender discrimination based on attractiveness, which is important given that many men will be evaluated by same-gender colleagues throughout their careers.

Introduction

In many cases, physical attractiveness is an asset, particularly in regards to favorable first impressions and social interactions (e.g., Eagly, Ashmore, Makhijani & Longo, 1991; Langlois et al., 2000). More specifically, people who are perceived as attractive are typically seen as more intelligent, likeable, funny, and socially adept when compared to those who are perceived as less attractive (e.g., Feingold, 1992). Further, researchers have noted that specific external characteristics, such as a suntan, can improve one’s chances of success in a job interview (Gillen & Bernstein, 2015), while unattractive characteristics such as excessive weight can decrease these chances (Grant & Mizzi, 2014). Based on these findings, it may be tempting to assume that the beautiful have it all. However, it seems this is not uniformly the case and that in some situations, attractiveness can even be detrimental. Negative evaluation of attractive individuals occurs in both social and romantic contexts, particularly among same-gender individuals as an attractive same-gendered person may be viewed as a threat to one’s romantic relationships (Maner, Miller, Rouby, & Gailliot, 2009). Furthermore, negative evaluations of attractive individuals have been found to produce both social avoidance (Agthe & Spörrle, 2009; Försterling, Preikschas, & Agthe, 2007) and denigration (Agthe, Spörrle, & Försterling, 2008) in social situations, like the workplace.

This negative evaluation of same-gender attractive individuals is referred to as the “Beauty is Beastly” effect and is well-documented among women in both interpersonal situations and in the workplace (e.g., Heilman & Saruwatari, 1979; Shahani-Denning et al., 2010). In fact, in Western cultures, a negative correlation between attractiveness and a woman’s likelihood of being hired is often observed. In Eastern, collectivistic cultures, however, attractiveness of women was found to be positively correlated with success in a hiring situation, suggesting a cultural influence. As such, it seems context may exert an influence on this effect. Indeed, although some researchers (Heilman & Stopeck, 1985) contend that the “beauty is beastly” effect only impacts attractive women, other researchers (Jackson, 1983) determined that this bias depends almost entirely on context. Specifically, attractive men were seen as more suitable for typically masculine jobs, whereas attractive women were considered more suitable for

Undergraduate Research Journal for the Human Sciences, Vol. 15 [2016], Iss. 1, Art. 13 typically feminine jobs. With these contradictory findings in mind, the professional implications of the beauty is beastly effect among men is not well understood, representing an important gap in the literature. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to address this gap.

Because attractive women seem at a disadvantage from same-gender professional evaluations when compared to average women (Agthe, Spörrle, & Maner, 2011), we expect that attractive men will suffer the same plight compared to more average counterparts. Specifying average same-gender counterparts is important for comparison because attractive individuals compared to overtly unattractive same-gender counterparts may benefit from the stereotype that "what is beautiful is good," which could mitigate or eliminate the "beauty is beastly" effect (Dion, Berscheid, & Walster, 1972). In other words, should an attractive man interview for a position, he may be at a disadvantage compared to another man who is more average in attractiveness, particularly when the hiring decision remains with one who is also a man.

In addition, this effect may have a lasting impact beyond the initial hiring decision. For example, throughout the course of their careers, many men will find themselves in situations of same-gender professional evaluation (e.g., performance appraisals, promotion considerations). In such situations, visual cues such as smiling, eye contact, hand movement, and body orientation strongly impact both interviewer ratings and supervisor performance ratings (e.g., DeGroot and Motowidlo, 1999). Thus, perceptions of attractiveness seem to have a pervasive and lasting influence on outcomes of importance within the workplace for men.

With these findings in mind, the purpose of this study is to determine whether the beauty is beastly effect impacts men in the workplace. Therefore, we hypothesize that attractive men will be significantly more likely to receive negative professional evaluations when compared to less attractive or "average" men in terms of hiring decisions.

Method

Participants

Participants were solicited from a random sample of 500 students among a mid-sized university in the Intermountain West of the United States. At a 25.8% response rate, we received 129 completed survey responses and all participants were between 18 and 50 years old ($M = 22.17$, $SD = 3.65$). In terms of gender and ethnicity, 54 (42%) participants were men and 119 (92.2%) were white. Participants were automatically entered into a raffle for two \$25 gift cards as an incentive to participate.

Measures

To determine appropriate photos for our manipulation, we conducted a pilot study with 30 stock photos from a public domain Google search standardized for relative weight, race, and professionalism; only photos of men were included and we omitted stock photos that featured overweight models, models that were not white, and models that were not wearing professional attire. We queried a convenience sample of 25 participants to establish the most attractive and most "average" looking model from these 30 stock photos using a ten-point Likert-type rating scale. The photo with the highest mean rating was 8.11 ($SD = 1.47$), the photo with the median rating was 5.92 ($SD = 2.11$), and the lowest was 3.36 ($SD = 1.38$). The highest rated photo was used for the attractive condition and the median rated photo served as our average image. Photos with high variability were omitted to ensure that these images were more representative of average men and attractive men, respectively; these served as the two photographs used for the current study.

Participants were presented with a paragraph about the fictional applicant's qualifications with the picture; both conditions had the same paragraph to keep these details constant. This paragraph read, "*Steven is applying for a position as a supervisor at an office at which you are*

Turner et al.: The Beautiful and the Damned: Exploring the Negative Side of Masculine the hiring manager. He has several years of experience in a variety of fields including insurance and finance. In addition to his extensive office experience, he has strong communication, customer service, and administrative skills. Steven recently graduated with a bachelor's degree in business." Then, participants were asked to indicate on a six-point Likert-type scale regarding how likely they were to hire Steven, where 1 = (very unlikely) and 6 = (very likely).

Design and Procedure

After initial response to the email invitation, participants were randomly assigned to two groups (conditions) via Qualtrics online survey software. They were instructed to act as managers, making a hiring decision for a position as a supervisor. Participants were given an intentionally vague job title to avoid individual academic backgrounds skewing the selection process. One group of participants was provided with a picture of the average looking applicant with the paragraph that detailed his qualifications ($n = 66$) while the second group was given a picture of the attractive applicant with the same qualifications ($n = 63$). Participants were then instructed to indicate their likelihood of hiring the applicant. We then employed a 2x2 factorial design (Two-Way Analysis of Variance or ANOVA) using gender and condition as our variables, since the principle variable of interest was the gender-condition interaction.

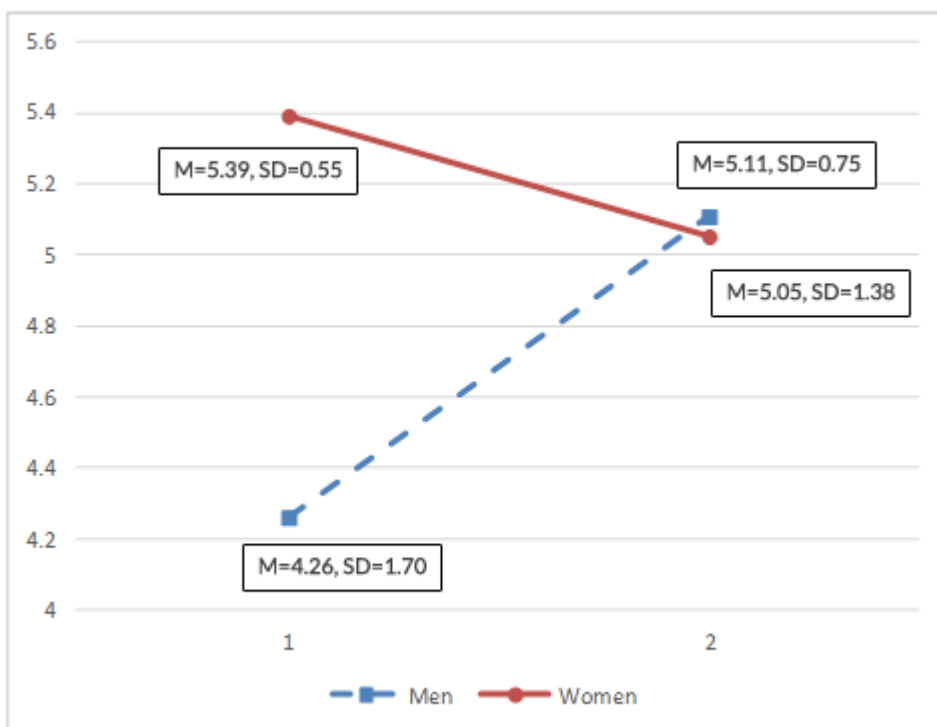
Results

First, for the attractive condition, the mean likelihood of men to hire the candidate was 4.26 ($SD = 1.70$) and for women it was 5.39 ($SD = 0.55$). Next, for the average condition, the mean was 5.11 ($SD = 0.75$) among men and 5.05 ($SD = 1.38$) for women. We further discovered that women ($M = 5.21$, $SD = 1.07$), in general, were significantly more likely to hire the candidate than men ($M = 4.69$, $SD = 1.37$) regardless of condition ($t[127] = -2.46$, $p = .015$). Somewhat counterintuitively, across both genders, the average likelihood of being hired for the attractive condition ($M = 4.90$, $SD = 1.30$) was less than the likelihood for the average ($M = 5.08$, $SD = 5.08$), though this was not significant ($t[127] = -.79$, $p = .431$).

With regard to our specific hypothesis that men would be significantly less likely to hire the attractive male applicant, we found support (see Table 1). First, as highlighted above, gender was a significant factor in the likelihood of hiring, with women being more likely to hire, in general ($F[1, 125] = 6.51$, $p = .012$, $\eta^2 = .050$). Second, condition was not a significant factor alone in the likelihood of hiring the candidates ($F[1, 125] = 1.51$, $p = .222$, $\eta^2 = .012$). Finally, in support of our hypothesis, we found that the interaction between gender and condition was significant ($F[1, 125] = 8.05$, $p = .005$, $\eta^2 = .061$), with men significantly more likely to hire the average male applicant. We plotted this interaction, which is in the expected direction (see Figure 1). These results suggest, similar to the beauty is beastly effect among women, that attractiveness may not be desirable for men in hiring situations where men make the hiring decision.

Table 1: Two-Way ANOVA Results Examining Gender and Condition on Likelihood to Hire

Variable	F-statistic (df)	p	η^2
Gender	6.51 (1, 125)	.012	.050
Condition	1.51 (1, 125)	.222	.012
Gender*Condition	8.05 (1, 125)	.005	.061

Figure 1: Condition \times Gender Hiring Likelihood

Note: 1 = Attractive Condition, 2 = Average Condition

Discussion

In the workplace, identifying and promoting awareness of potentially negative biases is important to ensure a safe and productive work environment. Similar to prior research on the “beauty is beastly” effect among women, we found a negative bias in hiring decisions toward men who are perceived as attractive. In particular, this seems to be especially true among same-gender individuals (e.g., male applicant and male evaluator), whereas opposite gender individuals seem to evaluate attractive people more favorably. Thus, while it is widely acknowledged that being attractive can increase professional opportunities (e.g., Eagly, Ashmore, Makhijani & Longo, 1991; Langlois et al., 2000), in-line with the “beauty is beastly” effect, we found that same-gender evaluative contexts may exhibit an inverse relationship among men, where attractive men are at a disadvantage when interviewing for employment with a male evaluator. This general tendency has important implications and ramifications for the workplace.

First, this raises a problematic issue in terms of evaluation since many men will find themselves in same-gender professional evaluations throughout the course of their careers. This evaluation may take the form of performance appraisals, letters of recommendation, and references on a job application. Bias negatively influences performance appraisals in the workplace (Martel & Evans, 2005), which could certainly affect employment, pay, and even professional development opportunities. Thus, attractive men may face a disadvantage in these situations if hiring managers or supervisors happen to be men. This seems especially worth considering in fields that are more male-dominated (e.g., construction, financial services, manufacturing), where there may be more opportunities for same-gender social comparisons.

Second, and perhaps most importantly, male supervisors may hold these biases implicitly and thus be unaware of their inherent discrimination towards attractive subordinates. Within specific social contexts, certain attitudes can be unconsciously or automatically activated and thus strongly influence subsequent thoughts and actions (Duksterhuis, 2010). Hence, for a male supervisor, the workplace may prime or activate implicit negative attitudes, which can then

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produce further thoughts of prejudice or discriminating behaviors against a perceived attractive male subordinate. In particular, this pattern of thought and behavior may stem from the widespread belief in a just world (Jost & Kay, 2010), where the supervisor may unconsciously feel motivated to enact social justice by penalizing the attractive subordinate due to his perceived typical social advantages accorded him because of his appearance. Ironically, what the supervisor may feel is more socially just, is typically viewed as discrimination and clearly contrary to most workplace policies.

Third, based on prior research findings, we might suspect that this implicit bias against attractive men by male supervisors might be addressed best by exposure to these concepts through training programs. Generally referred to as the "enlightenment effect," real-world behavior can be changed for the better after one has been exposed to social psychological research, which is poignantly demonstrated in studies on bystander nonintervention (e.g., Beaman, Barnes, Klentz, & McQuirk, 1978). As such, we might expect that once managers have been trained to not be biased or at least made aware of their bias against attractive male subordinates, discriminatory behaviors would decrease and perhaps disappear altogether.

Limitations and Future Research

It is important to consider some potential limitations to our study. First, our sample population of college students may not be representative of the workforce at large and our sample was relatively small, restricting our ability to generalize. However, we used a random sample with random assignment to experimental condition, which should have addressed this concern to some degree. Additionally, our sample was split almost evenly between conditions and gender was representative of general college student body demographics with slightly more women. Second, it is difficult to reach a sure conclusion about the effects of attractiveness on hiring decisions because participants were provided a photo rather than an *in vivo* experience and participants only evaluated one photo, rather than multiple, which is the norm in typical hiring situations. However, in part, our statistical approach (Two-Way ANOVA) takes into consideration more factors than one and helps to bolster our confidence in the observed results. Finally, our study design employed mock hiring situations, with no real consequence to hiring decisions, which does not reflect most workplace circumstances. Partly addressing this concern, we made efforts to standardize our approach to be more comparable by making both "applicants" white with a similar age, and by presenting the same paragraph description.

Our research addressed the "beauty is beastly" effect among men in hiring decisions, an important gap in the literature regarding discrimination toward men in hiring decisions based on attractive facial appearances. While our study lends support to the idea that male evaluators will show a negative discrimination towards attractive male hiring options, future research should investigate this effect among individuals who have real hiring power and stand to benefit or suffer loss based on that decision. Moreover, this effect should be explored using a within-persons design with multiple hiring candidate interviews in-person, as this is more similar to the actual hiring process. Additionally, this effect could be examined within performance appraisals of current employees to determine whether this effect, as postulated, extends beyond initial hiring into other evaluative circumstances in the workplace.

Summary

In conclusion, our research has powerful implications for workforce management and selection, especially in the contemporary working climate. Although a great deal of workplace research has focused on discrimination among traditional minorities (e.g., women), our research highlights the importance of considering other minorities, even those men who are considered to be very attractive in appearance. Our results highlight that these attractive men may be at-risk for receiving discrimination in terms of hiring decisions when those making that decision are themselves men. Even as the general future organization of work is constantly being

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