



Physical Attractiveness and Selection Decision Making

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Empirical research on the role of physical attractiveness in employment selection is reviewed. Physical attractiveness is conceptualized as a beneficial status characteristic, although further investigation of the magnitude of the bias is needed. Conceptual and methodological problems impeding understanding of physical attractiveness are noted and a descriptive model specifying the role of attractiveness in selection decision-making is offered.

Social psychologists have spent many years identifying the impact of individual demographic characteristics (e.g., sex, race, age) on evaluations made by others. Management researchers have been similarly interested in this topic because of the frequent use of subjective appraisals in making employment-related decisions (e.g., selection, promotion, compensation decisions). Both sets of investigators have found this to be a challenging task owing to changing stereotypes associated with demographic traits and the potential for interactions among the demographic traits themselves. Further compounding the difficulty of these assessments is the more substantive issue of whose evaluations should be studied. Conventionally, older white males were felt to best resemble the composition of corporate powerholders, but this view can be challenged as women and minorities assume more decision-making authority. The result of this inquiry, along with American political beliefs, has led to a number of legal mandates precluding the use of sex, race, and age (40 years and over) data in formulating personnel decisions. There is another demographic-like trait, however—physical attractiveness—that has repeatedly been shown to influence subjective evaluations yet has escaped regulation.

The purpose of this article is to review the role of physical attractiveness in employment selection. Because physical attractiveness is more salient during periods of impression formation, such as selection, the scope of this paper is limited to selection decisions. Although other types of employment decisions (e.g., promotions) may be influenced by attractiveness, the research in these areas is rather

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sparse. Similarly, physical attractiveness has been examined in other contexts, such as the evaluation of children and students (Clifford & Walster, 1973), the psychological well being of adults (Umberson & Hughes, 1987), political candidates (Sigelman, Thomas, Sigelman, & Ribich, 1986), romantic attraction, social deviance, and helping behavior (Patzner, 1985). Although insightful, the impact of physical attractiveness in these studies cannot be assumed to generalize to the employment context. Thus the focus of this paper is on pre-employment decision-making. The role of physical attractiveness as a personal characteristic and its potential interaction with other demographic characteristics are discussed first, followed by an analysis of conceptual and methodological problems in attractiveness research. Finally, a more theoretically based model that positions physical attractiveness in a field of selection relevant variables is outlined.

The Nature of Physical Attractiveness

The systematic study of physical attractiveness (PA) has not progressed rapidly because scientists have regarded attractiveness as somehow inappropriate for study. Historically, many have viewed attractiveness as an undemocratic, non-egalitarian, or superficial subject unworthy of investigation (Patzner, 1985). Interest in PA began to rise in the late 1960s, however, with the recognition of several phenomena related to employment selection practices. A number of studies indicated (a) that initial employment screenings are frequently searches for negative applicant information conducted in order to reduce the applicant pool and (b) that early interview impressions play a dominant role in final employment decisions (Cascio, 1978). PA, because of its potential to demonstrate primacy effects and/or contrast effects relative to other applicants or the characteristics of the position, has become recognized as an influential factor in employment decision making. The number of empirical studies devoted to PA has more than doubled since Arvey and Campion's 1982 discussion of employment interviews, which included the role of PA. A great deal of this research has appeared in psychology journals. Although psychologists have written extensively on this topic, it is interesting to note that management researchers have not published widely on PA. Perhaps this is a function of a lack of interest in the subject or reflects a belief that PA is inconsequential and therefore trivial. Or, perhaps the lack of management-related research on PA is simply a function of the absence of a systematic framework from which to launch such an effort. In any case, it is unfortunate that there is so little being reported in the literature that purports to better understand the role of PA in employment, because this is the context in which PA is likely to demonstrate the strongest economic impact on individuals. The purpose of this article, therefore, is to summarize and synthesize the growing body of research related to PA and to develop a descriptive model showing how PA may influence the employment selection process.

Definitions of Attractiveness

Seldom have researchers offered a conceptual definition of PA. Accordingly, it has not evolved into a scientific concept and generated evidence to support its validity. Most investigators have treated PA as a gestalt type of concept that is not dimensionalized (e.g., moderately attractive hair, unattractive nose) and that can

be rated quantitatively from low (unattractive) to high (very attractive); researchers have also restricted their definition to facial attractiveness (e.g., Cann, Siegfried, & Pearce, 1981; Cash, Gillen, & Burns, 1977; Cash & Kilcullen, 1985; Gillen, 1981; Heilman & Saruwatari, 1979; Heilman & Stopeck, 1985; Jackson, 1983). A few studies have focused on more holistic evaluations of attractiveness using observations of applicants by interviewers (Raza & Carpenter, 1987; Umberson & Hughes, 1987). Others have emphasized other aspects of PA, such as job applicant weight (Larkin & Pines, 1979) or the appropriateness of dress (Lambert, 1972). However, from an inductive perspective, the following definition could be said to characterize most previous research: PA is the degree to which one's facial image elicits favorable reactions from others.

PA has most often been measured by asking raters to judge the PA of persons in portrait photographs, similar to those appearing in high school and college yearbooks. Operationalizing PA in this manner has been shown to have high reliability. That is, people within a given culture tend to agree with each other regarding whether a person's facial appearance is physically attractive or not and they tend to be consistent in their judgments over time (Hatfield & Sprecher, 1986; Umberson & Hughes, 1987). In addition, both male and female judges demonstrate a high level of consensus concerning the attractiveness level of a person (Patzner, 1985). In summary, though researchers have not paid much attention to the conceptualization of PA (e.g., is PA a stable or variable attribute?), there has been consensus over its measurement.

Impact of Attractiveness

Numerous studies have supported the observation that highly attractive persons are perceived as possessing positive traits whereas those low in PA are perceived less positively (Gillen, 1981). This generalization has come to be known as the "what is beautiful is good stereotype" (Dion, Berscheid, & Walster, 1972). It has been found to be particularly potent in studies simulating selection decisions. Attractive applicants are perceived to be more qualified for employment than unattractive applicants (Cash et al., 1977; Dipboye, Fromkin, & Wilback, 1975; Raza & Carpenter, 1987), and are recommended to receive higher starting salaries (Dipboye, Arvey, & Terpstra, 1977; Jackson, 1983). In addition, there is preliminary evidence that attractiveness and ability interact over one's career such that an organization is likely to retain those jointly high in attractiveness and ability (Dickey-Bryant, Lautenschlager, Mendoza, & Abrahams, 1986).

Some noteworthy exceptions to this pattern of findings have recently emerged, however, that suggest PA may not always be advantageous. For example, it has been found that PA women are not viewed as positively as unattractive women when they are under consideration for a masculine-stereotyped job. This observation has been termed the "beauty is beastly" effect (Heilman & Saruwatari, 1979) and has stimulated additional research seeking to identify other factors that may mediate the PA/positive outcome linkage. Another recent trend has been the formulation of models that seek to explain the magnitude of the PA bias (e.g., Raza & Carpenter, 1987). Accordingly, research on the relationship between PA and sex, race, and age will be reviewed followed by a summary of recent theory building efforts.

The Relationship Between Sex and Physical Attractiveness

Much of the interest in the relationship between sex and PA can be traced to two observations. First, it is generally assumed that women are evaluated more than men in terms of their PA and that this gender-linked bias may continue to have an impact on equal employment opportunity (Cash et al., 1977). Secondly, there has been a distinct preference for males over females in pre-1979 studies related to employment decision making and mixed findings thereafter (see Jackson, 1983). In light of these observations, it was natural to presuppose that attractiveness might be more salient for women. Empirical studies of sex and PA generally report that PA is advantageous to both men and women but that attractive males are preferred over attractive females in employment decisions (Cann et al., 1981; Cash & Kilcullen, 1985; Dipboye et al., 1975; Dipboye et al., 1977). Thus, this research suggests that attractiveness does not compensate for the conventional preference for males.

These findings can be challenged on a number of grounds, however. First, the preference for males might be a finding that will not transcend into the future. One could argue that a pro-male bias is a cohort artifact that will disappear as employment decision makers attempt to make sex an irrelevant factor in their recommendations and as the number of women in decision-making positions increases. Several recent PA studies support this contention by reporting no main effects for sex on work related outcomes (Gilmore, Beehr, & Love, 1986; Heilman & Saruwatari, 1979; Jackson, 1983; Wilson, Crocker, Brown, Johnson, Liotta, & Konat, 1985). In addition, presenting male and female stimulus photographs simultaneously may prime raters to be sensitive to this issue and artificially diminish the impact of sex. A second challenge to these findings is that the preference for males may be the result of the preponderance of managerial jobs used in these studies. Because managerial jobs imply a preference for an applicant with masculine traits (Heilman & Saruwatari, 1979), low ratings for women may be a function of a different form of sex discrimination (i.e., a preference for a stereotypically sex congruent applicant). It is also possible that PA ratings for males are inflated via a latent tendency to attribute desirable traits like attractiveness to the "best" (i.e., male) applicant. Clearly more research controlling for the sex typedness of jobs is needed and several investigations were located addressing this issue.

Type of Job

The notion that the nature of a job interacts with sex and PA was first proposed by Dipboye et al. (1975) and first empirically studied by Cash et al. (1977). Cash et al. argued that the "what is beautiful is good" stereotype holds only when the sex of the applicant matches the type of job under consideration (i.e., masculine, feminine). In a study using personnel consultants as raters, they found support for this argument, observing that for masculine jobs, males were perceived as more qualified than females and attractive males as more qualified than unattractive males. For feminine jobs, females were perceived as more qualified than males and attractive females as more qualified than unattractive females. For sex-neutral jobs, PA was advantageous for both sexes. Thus, the pro-male preference

does not appear to be a generalized phenomenon, but seems restricted to masculine-stereotyped occupations. Moreover, PA continues to be seen as advantageous within congruent sex-job combinations (Jackson, 1983). Although reassuring in some respects, there is still the issue of how attractiveness operates for men and women seeking sex-incongruent jobs.

Three additional studies have focused on this particular issue (i.e., how PA influences men and women seeking or holding masculine/managerial jobs). No research was found evaluating how PA affects the evaluations of males seeking or holding feminine jobs. Heilman and Saruwatari (1979) and Heilman and Stopeck (1985) both found that though attractiveness was an asset for women seeking or holding nonmanagerial roles, they were penalized by attractiveness when seeking or holding managerial positions. With respect to men, PA was advantageous for men applying to either type of job in the Heilman and Saruwatari study. However, the Heilman and Stopeck study found that PA had no bearing on the performance evaluations of men holding managerial or nonmanagerial jobs. Cash and Kilcullen (1985) followed a somewhat different approach by taking the stereotyped male job of manager and making it more androgynous or sex neutral. The position was defined such that interpersonal competencies in the job were deemed most important. Their findings indicated that PA was advantageous to both sexes and that unattractive males and females were rated similarly in hiring recommendations. Attractive male applicants were, however, preferred over attractive female applicants, reinforcing the pro-male bias argument.

Taken together these findings suggest that, independent of the type of job, PA is generally an asset for men. Only the Heilman and Stopeck (1985) study did not support this conclusion. For women, the findings vary with the type of job. For managerial (masculine) jobs, PA is probably a handicap for women. Unattractive women, who might be regarded as less feminine and therefore more appropriate for the job, are preferred. However, if the managerial job is defined such that interpersonal skills are stressed, attractive females may not be penalized compared to unattractive females. For nonmanagerial jobs, PA is desirable; attractive women are rewarded more than unattractive women. However, attractive males will still be rated more highly than attractive females in and for these positions.

Other Job Related Factors

Considerations of interactions among sex, physical attractiveness, and type of job have extended beyond sex role congruency to include applicant sex role orientation (i.e., the extent to which a person is regarded as masculine, feminine, or androgynous) and the relevancy of PA to a specific job. Jackson (1983) found that masculine and androgynous applicants were preferred for masculine occupations, feminine and androgynous applicants were preferred for feminine and sex-neutral occupations, and that PA was an advantage in each case. This is consistent with the logic and findings of Cash et al. (1977) and Cash and Kilcullen (1985). The notion that PA may be of some job related importance has been advanced in two studies. Beehr and Gilmore (1982) argued that PA could be an asset in sales and some managerial jobs where face-to-face communication is important. They found support for just such an interaction effect among hypothetical

male job applicants. However, in a later study using both male and female applicants, PA was not observed to interact with the PA relevancy of the job (Gilmore et al., 1986).

Type of Rater

The research on sex and PA has primarily relied on the evaluations of student raters simulating hiring decisions. Only a few studies have employed personnel consultants or recruiters as raters (e.g., Cash et al., 1977; Jackson, 1983). Fewer still have compared the evaluations of student and professional raters. The orientation of most researchers has been to cite the work of Bernstein, Hakel, and Harlan (1975), which concluded that students' and professional interviewers' ratings of job applicants were nearly identical. This assessment appears justified based on the two sex and PA studies that compared the two rater groups (Dipboye et al., 1975; Gilmore et al., 1986). Both studies found that student raters were more lenient than professionals, but there were no other type of rater interactions. However, more recent research on the use of nonrepresentative raters suggests that the two groups are not interchangeable (Gordon, Slade, & Schmitt, 1986).

Finally, a few studies have examined other rater characteristics as potential moderators (e.g., sex, age, attractiveness). These studies are limited in number and detail so as to preclude any conclusions, but the preliminary evidence suggests they are not influential (Cann et al., 1981; Cash et al., 1977; Dipboye et al., 1977; Jackson, 1983; Raza & Carpenter, 1987).

The Relationship Between Race and Physical Attractiveness

Although some research has been completed concerning how race affects employment-related decisions, virtually no attention has been directed to race and PA interactions. Stated differently, our knowledge concerning the impact of PA on selection decision making is restricted to whites. Moreover, because the race of raters is seldom reported, one might assume that the research on PA in general is derived from white perceptions. Based on research from other areas, PA is likely to be beneficial as PA blacks are viewed as more desirable dates and judged to write better essays than unattractive blacks (Patzner, 1985). Clearly we have no real understanding of whether the "what is beautiful is good" stereotype extends to non-white job applicants or employees or whether non-white raters engage in this form of stereotyping.

Research on the role of race in employment interviewer decisions indicates very little adverse discrimination toward blacks (Arvey & Campion, 1982). However, the findings associated with performance ratings are mixed and are affected by the race of the rater (Bigoness, 1976; Schmitt & Lippin, 1980). Schmitt and Lippin (1980) report that people are more confident of ratings of people in their racial group than they are of ratings of other racial groups. It may well be that such a tendency will be replicated in judgments about PA. It is also possible, however, that the effects of PA will be overwhelmed by race whenever racially mixed groups are evaluated. A great deal of research is needed in this area.

The Relationship Between Age and Physical Attractiveness

As in the case of race, age has seldom been considered in conjunction with PA. Only one study was identified that explicitly addressed this issue. Raza and Carpenter (1987) found that older job applicants were judged less attractive and that female interviewers rendered lower attractiveness ratings to older applicants than male interviewers. The lack of research in this area is surprising in view of several studies that confirm that age stereotypes of jobs affect performance ratings (Cleveland & Landy, 1983) and that negative attitudes toward older workers persist (Bird & Fisher, 1986). These negative attitudes are typically explained by beliefs that older workers cannot meet job demands, are less creative and trainable and less able to cope with stress. Hatfield and Sprecher (1986) suggest that age discrimination may be much more basic: perhaps the preference for the young is a surrogate preference for the attractive. They succinctly pose the question by asking "Is the sin being old or unattractive?" (Hatfield & Sprecher, 1986, p. 58).

Thus there are at least three possible explanations why older workers are negatively affected in selection decision making: (a) generalized beliefs that older workers are less effective, (b) a perception that young hires have more potential and represent a better return on investment, and (c) a preference for the PA, who are assumed more likely to be young. Virtually no research has addressed the question of what age people are considered to be most attractive (Hatfield & Sprecher, 1986), although there is some evidence that attractiveness diminishes with age (Deutsch, Zalenski, & Clark, 1986; O'Connell & Rotter, 1979). Interestingly, various age groups seem to agree on the PA of others and PA has been shown to be an asset within similarly aged groups (Hatfield & Sprecher, 1986). From this one might hypothesize that PA is advantageous within one's age group, but not necessarily in comparison with others from different age groups.

Research is needed to determine whether age and PA interact to influence selection decisions (e.g., do older attractive applicants fare better than younger, unattractive ones?). There is also the strong possibility of three-way interactions involving age, PA, and sex. Deutsch et al. (1986) observed that though the attractiveness of men and women both decline with age, the decline for women is greater and that older men are rated more attractive than older women. They also found that ratings of women's femininity decreased with age, but ratings of men's masculinity was unaffected by age. Pairing these findings together, Deutsch et al. argue the presence of a double standard relative to aging, with women judged more harshly than men in terms of PA and sexuality (femininity). This would suggest that older, unattractive women may receive less favorable employment-related ratings. However, in view of the previous research citing the moderating effect of sex typedness of job, older unattractive women might be seen as *more* suitable for some jobs (i.e., masculine stereotyped). Clearly, the relationship between age and PA presents an interesting and important avenue for research.

Conceptual and Methodological Problems in PA Research

The PA literature is marked by several conceptual and methodological problems. These problems are interrelated and their resolution is likely to have implications for the substantive understanding of PA. Five issues, along with recommendations for their disposition, were identified.

1. *Restriction in range in the measurement of PA.* Many studies on PA have concentrated on comparisons between those low and high in PA and have not included middle levels of attractiveness. Notable exceptions to this pattern are evident in the work by Cann et al. (1981), Dipboye et al. (1977), Jackson (1983), Raza and Carpenter (1987), Siegelman et al. (1986), Umberson and Hughes (1987), and Wilson et al. (1985). Failure to include intermediary levels is attributable to the use of experimental research designs seeking to restrict the number of subjects to a manageable number. The problem of course is that this approach does not provide information about persons with average levels of PA, the group that logic would suggest typifies most people. However, PA has not been demonstrated to be a normally distributed phenomenon and it is possible there are threshold or step functions in PA. Future research should include middle levels of attractiveness.

2. *Control versus generalizability.* The simultaneous need for control and generalizability is particularly perplexing in the study of PA. So many subject and rater factors may influence employment decisions that laboratory studies are dominant. Laboratory studies can be criticized because they capitalize on the priming effect associated with the PA of "paper people" and are nonrepresentative when academic and student raters are employed (Gordon et al., 1986). They are also often criticized for transparency (i.e., raters discern that PA is a variable of interest). There is a growing tendency to combine hypothetical resumes and photographs with evaluations from professional raters (e.g., recruiters, personnel administrators), which may lessen some of these criticisms. The transparency issue is more difficult to resolve, but would be less problematic if the methodology employed were more realistic. Simulated selection decision-making experiments using experienced raters would be beneficial along with the inclusion of more information relevant to the selection decision-making process (e.g., applicant education, relevant experience, personality traits).

3. *Normative biases.* The transparency issue is linked to another problem in PA research, that of social desirability. When raters recognize that PA is under investigation, it is reasonable to assume that many will under-report the extent to which this factor influences their selection decisions. Stated differently, familiarity with equal employment opportunity guidelines may serve to prime subjects on the intent of the study, causing them to report more socially responsible actions rather than their actual behavior. More unobtrusive methods for studying this phenomena are needed. For example, simulated interviews which are videotaped and then presented to raters might reduce transparency and social desirability in responses.

4. *Magnitude of the PA bias.* Another methodological problem is the need to secure more information on the size of the PA bias. There are arguments that suggest the PA bias may be either overestimated or underestimated. Researchers re-

porting percentages of explained variation in conjunction with PA are comparatively few in number (e.g., Beehr & Gilmore, 1982; Dipboye et al., 1975; Dipboye et al., 1977; Gilmore et al., 1986; Heilman & Stopek, 1985; and Raza & Carpenter, 1987) and this evidence suggests the bias is small. The common use of extreme levels of PA in PA studies further supports this interpretation. That is, if only small amounts of variance are explained using extremely attractive and extremely unattractive subjects, one might infer that PA will have even smaller effects when more typical PA differences are considered.

On the other hand, transparency and social desirability pressures are likely to result in an underestimation of the size of the bias. Thus, at this point, the data are perhaps best viewed as equivocal and await more ecologically sound research designs. Another question to address in future research is the comparative size of the PA bias. It would be interesting to learn how PA's relative size compares with other factors influential in the selection process (e.g., education, experience). It would also be interesting to see how PA functions when these other factors are held constant. Dipboye et al. (1975), for example, observed biases in favor of male and attractive candidates when scholastic standing was equal. This is consistent with Morrow and McElroy's (1984: 171) assessment that PA advantages operate primarily "on the margin." The point is that PA needs to be studied in a more systematic manner if we are to ascertain its usefulness as a factor affecting selection and other work-related decisions.

5. *Reconceptualization and operationalization of PA.* Related to all of these problems is the issue of how PA is conceptualized and measured. The typical methodology has been to use facial portrait photographs, and an inductively formulated definition consistent with this approach was offered earlier in this article. PA might better be conceptualized and measured on a more holistic basis, however, in future research. Selection decisions normally include interviewing activities where applicants are observed in their entirety (i.e., their body characteristics, height, weight, voice, style of dress, posture, etc.). The small effect sizes observed in previous studies may not only be due to transparency and social desirability, but they may also be a function of the narrow conceptualization and measurement of PA. A more appropriate definition of PA might be the degree to which one's physical image elicits favorable reactions from others. Correspondingly, the operationalization of PA might follow a facet approach whereby dimensions of PA (e.g., voice, dress, facial appearance) are rated separately, along with an overall rating. The use of videotaped simulated interviews would provide a good basis for this type of operationalization.

Along with the underdeveloped conceptualization of PA, it is also evident that there has been little theoretical development of PA vis-a-vis other variables relevant to employment decision making or other affiliated topics. These observations suggest that a stronger theoretical basis for the study of PA needs to be formulated.

Theoretical Underpinnings of PA

Although most of the research related to PA has been relatively atheoretical, two independent attempts have recently been made to locate PA within broader

frameworks. These two efforts are briefly reviewed because they serve as the starting point for the formulation of a new model describing the role of PA in selection decision making.

Raza and Carpenter (1987) have developed a model seeking to explain interviewer recommendations of applicant hirability (see Figure 1). They postulate that employability and skill are the direct causes of hirability and that likability, intelligence, and skill are directly related to employability. Likability is the most antecedent of these variables and it is presumed to be caused by PA. Moreover, demographic variables (identified as job type, applicant sex and age, and interviewer sex and age) were viewed as the determinants of PA. Raza and Carpenter empirically evaluated the model and found that the demographic variables were indeed good predictors of PA. They also observed that PA was positively related to hirability, but that likability, intelligence and skill were each more strongly related to hirability. Although weak in explaining why some linkages exist, this multivariate approach promotes a fuller understanding of PA by suggesting that demographic characteristics are its principal determinants.

Raza and Carpenter's (1987) model is couched at a relatively low level of abstraction. Umberson and Hughes (1987) propose that a more general and abstract theory can subsume the study of PA (see Figure 2). They argue that Status Characteristics Theory, which contends that people are likely to organize their perceptions and expectations of others around the status characteristics of sex and race, can be extended to include PA. Umberson and Hughes thus suggest that PA is a status characteristic like sex or race. They do not imply that the demographic characteristics cause PA. This approach is useful because it explains how an attribute like PA influences initial expectations and evaluations and how, over time, these evaluations impact on the subsequent performance of the person evaluated. For example, an unattractive job applicant may be judged as unsuitable; upon rejection, that applicant may view himself or herself as less competent. Such a self-perception, in turn, may cause the applicant to perform less well in a later interview (i.e., set a self-fulfilling prophecy into motion). More specifically, Umberson and Hughes argue that PA persons are provided more and easier opportunities to be successful and have more self-esteem resources. They then tested whether

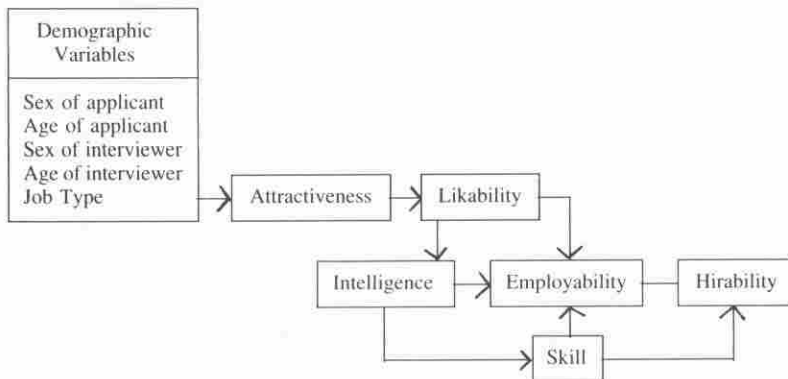


Figure 1: Raza and Carpenter's (1987) model of hirability.

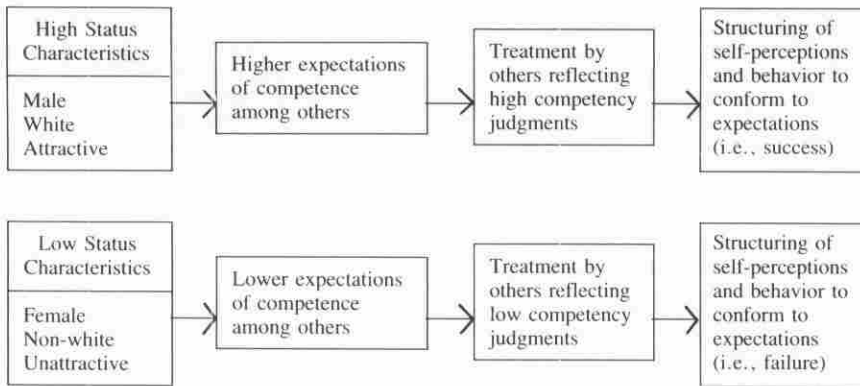


Figure 2: Model of status characteristics theory following Umberson and Hughes (1987).

PA persons achieve more (e.g., have higher incomes and socio-economic status) and experience higher psychological well being than unattractive persons. Their data, drawn from a representative sample of American workers, supported this conclusion.

Taken together, these two theoretical models suggest the development of a theory of the middle range (i.e., a theory at a moderate level of abstraction). Such theories are not advanced as entirely unique contributions, but as translations of highly abstract propositions into more empirically testable statements. Figure 3 proposes a model that partially synthesizes the two models and seeks to describe how PA is related to a variety of selection-related evaluations. In addition, it suggests how age, race, and sex of applicants factor into the selection decision. Although the model to follow is intended to be more descriptive than explanatory at this stage of development, some initial hypotheses suitable for testing are offered in the course of the discussion.

Proposed Model

PA and age are identified as status characteristics comparable to sex and race and are hypothesized to influence a variety of selection related ratings (e.g., employability, hirability, starting salary). Research indicates that those high in status characteristics (e.g., white, male, attractive) are perceived to have more skills and abilities, superior performance, higher positions, and more influence (Umberson & Hughes, 1987). Conventional wisdom suggests that relative youth is a desirable trait among adults, although there is little data to support this contention. The interrelationships among the status characteristics are not considered in the present model, although Raza and Carpenter (1987) suggest that sex and age are determinants of PA. Little is known about these interrelationships beyond sex and PA interactions, and these findings seem contingent on job type. Moreover, although some evidence suggests that older persons are viewed as less PA than younger persons, it is quite conceivable that some older persons would be regarded as more attractive than younger persons. Accordingly, and counter to Raza and Carpenter (1987), PA is classified as a status characteristic rather than

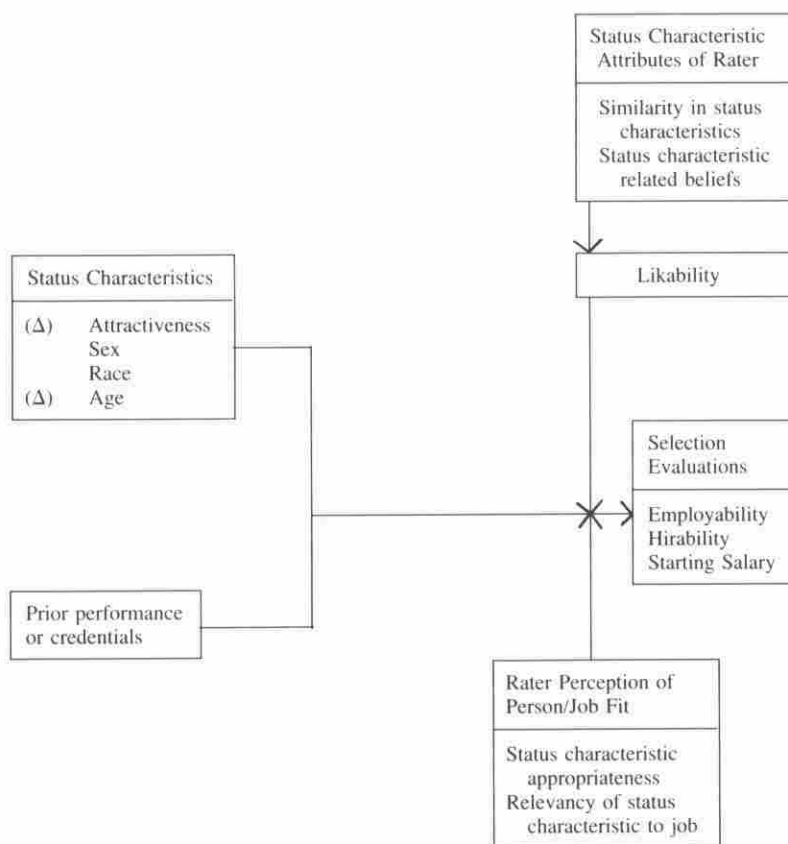


Figure 3: Role of status characteristics, performance/credentials, status characteristic attributes of raters, and rater perceptions of person/job fit on selection evaluations.

a consequence of status characteristics. In deference to Raza and Carpenter's findings, however, PA is hypothesized to have a stronger direct effect on rater evaluations than sex, race or age, other things being equal. Finally, the delta signs within the status characteristics box signify that attractiveness and age are dynamic variables capable of change over time.

Past performance and/or credentials (e.g., skills, education) are also assumed to have a direct impact on rater evaluations. The attributional effect of performance on perceptual measures is well documented (see Morrow & McElroy, 1984). Accordingly, it is hypothesized that this factor should account for the greatest proportion of the variation in selection evaluations. Moreover, this information is necessary if the magnitude of the PA and other status characteristic biases are to be meaningfully estimated (i.e., potential or previous performance data are normally available in most selection contexts).

Status Characteristic Attributes of Rater

Two sets of variables are hypothesized to intervene between status characteristics and prior performance on the one hand and selection evaluations on the

other. The first set is identified as the status characteristic attributes of the rater and includes such dimensions as similarity in status and beliefs related to status characteristics. These factors are posited as relatively fixed rater attributes that operate independently of any job context. Although only two examples are specified here, others (e.g., the PA of the rater) may also exist.

Perceived similarity with someone has been shown to determine likability and trust in general psychological research (see Patzer, 1985: 99) and in the employment context (Kanter, 1977). Pressures for similarity in the work environment are even greater than in everyday life because people look to social bases for trust as a means of reducing uncertainty. Similarity in status characteristics thus provides an initial bond between people that enhances likability. Thus it is hypothesized that in selection contexts, applicants who share status characteristics with the rater will be judged more likable than applicants with dissimilar status characteristics, other things being equal. Kanter (1977: 54) extends this thesis even further by arguing that the preference for social similarity is so strong that it results in "homosocial reproduction" of employees in organizations (i.e., selection or advancement of employees with similar status characteristics). Although not linked to the social similarity argument, Raza and Carpenter (1987) provide empirical support for the role of likability in that PA is a determinant of likability that in turn is a predictor of employability and hirability. Whether similarity in PA directly affects ratings is not known; it may be overshadowed by the general preference for the PA.

Beliefs related to status characteristics include a wide variety of rater attitudes and stereotypes. These include such things as the rater's sex role attitudes (e.g., attitudes toward women, sex role orientation), racial attitudes, and age stereotypes. The sex role orientation of raters (i.e., masculine, feminine, or androgynous), for example, has been shown to result in differential hiring recommendations for attractive and unattractive job applicants (Cash & Kilcullen, 1985). Similarly, the rater's racial prejudice negatively affects the evaluation of job candidates (Rand & Wexley, 1975). One might logically hypothesize that the age and PA beliefs held by raters might influence the relationship between status characteristics, performance, and rater evaluations, with the direction of the bias contingent on the favorability or unfavorability of the belief relative to the applicant (e.g., older people are slow learners and therefore difficult to train; attractive people think they can get by on their looks).

Perceived Person/Job Fit

The relationship between the ratee and the job, as perceived by the rater, may also affect how status characteristics and prior performance data impact on selection evaluations. Heilman and Stopeck (1985) generally refer to this as a "lack of fit" model. More specifically, the perceived appropriateness of status characteristics (e.g., sex role congruency) and the relevancy of status characteristics to the job may moderate the relationship. The distinction between these two factors is admittedly fuzzy and rests on whether the perception is based on stereotypes or more factual judgments regarding capability. Stated differently, the effects of status characteristics like PA are mediated by perceived differences in the fit between an applicant's characteristics and the requirements of the job, with nega-

tive reactions resulting from perceived incongruencies (Van Fleet & Saurage, 1984).

Cash et al. (1977) and Jackson (1983) provide evidence for the status characteristic appropriateness bias. Cash et al. report that males are more favorably evaluated for masculine jobs and females are more favorably evaluated for feminine jobs. Furthermore, within each job type (i.e., masculine, feminine), PA applicants were rated more highly. Similarly, Jackson (1983) found that the sex role orientation of stimulus persons influences raters' evaluations of suitability for masculine, feminine, and sex-neutral occupations. An example of the relevancy of status characteristics is provided by Beehr and Gilmore (1982). They found that PA was an advantage for applicants seeking jobs where PA was judged to be instrumental in job performance. While the relevancy of sex, race, and age to various jobs is probably a minor issue, the relevancy of PA may be a substantial intervening factor in some selection situations (e.g., sales representatives for cosmetics).

In summary, and concentrating on the role of PA, this model contends that PA acts as a status characteristic directly influencing selection evaluations. Although research to date supports this contention, it likely fosters a much too simplistic view. The model postulates that other factors (including prior performance, other status characteristics, the status characteristic attributes of the rater and subsequent likability, and the rater perception of person/job fit) must be taken into account if the true role and magnitude of the effect of PA is to be determined.

Implications for the Study of PA

This article has sought to review previous research related to PA in selection decision making and to position PA in a broader theoretical context. There are clearly many unanswered questions regarding the role and importance of PA. For example, this article has regarded various types of selection decisions (e.g., hirability, starting salary) as interchangeable. Because selection decisions may be hierarchical in nature, PA may be related to some types of decisions but not others. The most crucial questions involve the absolute and relative magnitude of the PA bias (trivial or substantial); whether it functions differentially for women as compared to men, and whites as compared to nonwhites; and whether age is a surrogate for PA. Also important is the question of whether PA biases transcend time and performance information or are instead only operational during impression formation processes. But consider the implications if PA biases are found to be pervasive and nontransitory.

Is differential preference based on PA ever "fair"? Evidence validating employment-related discrimination against the overweight (Larkin & Pines, 1979) and smokers already exists. Are these presently unregulated forms of discrimination "fair"? Some would argue yes because they involve at least some measure of employee control. But what about attractiveness? Could unattractiveness be viewed as a special form of handicap? Lastly, and beyond the scope of this article is the question of whether PA is ever linked to job performance (e.g., are PA salespeople more successful)?

These issues are intended to be more than rhetorical questions. Opportunities

to engage in PA discrimination, albeit latent and unintended, may actually be increasing via the growing use of videotape interviews and video personnel databases (O'Leary, 1988). Assessing the impact of attractiveness given these practices would seem worthwhile. Even if PA biases are ultimately judged to be small, small effects can be substantive when the number of qualified applicants exceeds the number of positions available. It is hoped that this article will stimulate the research necessary for a more complete understanding of the role of physical attractiveness in selection decision making.

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