Face it: Attractive people profit from their beauty

BY MARK ROTH
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Two hundred-fifty thousand dollars. That’s how much extra a good-looking American male will earn during his lifetime than his less attractive colleagues, University of Texas economist Daniel Hamermesh says. It’s equivalent to about 1 1/2 additional years of schooling.

Hamermesh — author of “Beauty Pays,” a book scheduled for publication next summer by Princeton University Press — contends not only that beauty has benefits, but that attractiveness carries a penalty.

After adjusting for all the other factors that can affect earnings, he writes, women in the bottom third of looks are paid about 10 percent less than average-looking employees. Men in that group are paid 1 percent less.

If we accept those findings, the questions then become: Does it matter and should we do anything about it?

On that, experts disagree.

One who thinks that people should not be penalized for their appearance is Deborah Rhode, a law professor at Stanford University, who this year wrote a book on “The Beauty Bias.” She recommends more state or local laws barring discrimination based on appearance, as well as a concerted campaign to battle false or misleading beauty industry claims.

Catherine Hakim, a senior research fellow in sociology at the London School of Economics, not only opposes anti-discrimination laws based on looks, but believes the advantages people get from being attractive should be celebrated and counted as an economic asset.

She laid out her ideas this year in a European Sociological Review article titled “Erotic Capital, and she’s writing a book of the same name that will be published in September.

“It’s simply not true that appearance is genetic and unalterable,” she said during an October interview in London, “so it’s not the same thing as race discrimination or sex discrimination.” Jurisdictions in the United States have anti-bias laws on appearance, and few complaints are ever adjudicated, Stanford’s Rhode noted. The greatest value of such laws may not be in achieving individual remedies, but in shining a spotlight on unfair practices based on looks, she said.

She cited the case of Jennifer Portnich, a 240-pound exercise instructor who was denied a franchise by Jazzercise, a fitness chain. Portnich sued under San Francisco’s anti-bias law, and “the groundswell of public support made it quite clear that for a lot of women, having an instructor who looked just like them was a good thing,” she said. The company changed its policy.

Hamermesh said it is devilishly hard sometimes to determine whether “lookism” is based on prejudice or real economic benefits good-looking people generate.

“People like to deal with good-looking people,” he said. “They like to have good-looking colleagues or bosses, and a good-looking boss is likely to inspire workers better, and customers like to buy from good-looking salespeople. Is this discrimination or is this not discrimination?”

Hakim believes there is little parallel between race bias and appearance bias, because “erotic capital,” as she defines it, involves several factors that people can change for themselves.

While beauty or handiness is a central element, she said, there is also sexual attractiveness, “which can be quite separate from classic beauty,” as well as social grace, liveliness, personal style and sexual energy.

Women particularly can enhance their erotic capital, even if they weren’t born with the best looks, Hakim says. They can compensate with flattering clothing, makeup and hairstyles. “It doesn’t make you beautiful, but you can become attractive, which is a very different thing. The French always have had this idea that artifice wins over nature every time.”

Her ideas get some support from studies done by Philip Robins and his colleagues at the University of Miami.

An economist, Robins worked with a large database of young people who had been rated on attractiveness, grooming and personality, and then tracked what happened to them later in life. His studies showed that the most important economic advantage for men was grooming, and that grooming and personality trumped appearance in women.

The studies found employers paid people more for these attributes.

“The appearance premium showed up not just in professions where attractiveness was part of the job description (TV newscaster, model) but in professions where it shouldn’t be (computer programmer, accountant).”

The debate over what beauty standards women ought to meet often leaves them torn about what to do.

Hakim said that a polished appearance should be valued in the workplace, just as a high IQ is. “You could argue that there’s an economic return to intelligence, but there’s not for attractiveness, but that’s wrong,” she said. “Attractive people sell more. Attractive people are more persuasive in an argument.”

But Rhode maintained “appearance is not a solid basis for meritocratic employment.”

“I’m not against beauty and the pleasure that people take in their own appearance and the appearance of others,” she said, “but I am against injustice, and I’m in favor of trying to cure our preoccupation with appearance in ways that are damaging to people’s self esteem or economic well-being.”

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