

Case Study: *Beauty (or lack thereof) in the classroom*

UT–Austin, like just about every other major university in the country, asks students to evaluate the quality of instruction they have received from their professors. In your career at UT, you will almost certainly have participated in this process, rating your professors on a scale of 1 (very unsatisfactory) to 5 (excellent). These ratings, in turn, are part of what administrators use to evaluate faculty performance, set salaries, promote instructors, and confer teaching awards—giving you a non-trivial say in the future direction of the university.

The file “profs.csv” contains data on course-instructor surveys from a sample of 463 courses at the University of Texas from 2000–2002. You are also given information about the individual courses and professors—including, most controversially, a rating of each professor’s physical attractiveness, as judged by students. The data represent evaluations from 25,547 students and most major departments.¹

The variables included are:

minority: is the professor from a non-Caucasian ethnic minority?

age: the professor’s age.

gender: a factor indicating the professor’s gender.

credits: a factor indicating whether the course is a single-credit elective (e.g. scuba diving or ballroom dancing, coded “single”) or an academic course (coded “more”).

beauty: a rating of the professor’s physical attractiveness, as judged by a panel of six students. The score was averaged across all six panelists, and shifted to have a mean of zero.

eval: the professor’s average teaching evaluation for courses in the sample, on a scale of 1 to 5.

division: whether the course is an upper or lower division course.

native: whether the professor is a native English speaker.

tenure: whether the professor is tenured or on the tenure track.

students: the number of students that participated in the evaluation.

allstudents: the number of students enrolled in the course.

prof: a unique numerical identifier for the professor being rated.

The fundamental question for you to address is: do teachers who are perceived as more attractive receive higher course-instructor evaluations, other relevant factors being equal?² Remember your model diagnostics, and use them wisely.

¹ Data from “Beauty in the classroom: instructors’ pulchritude and putative pedagogical productivity.” Daniel S. Hamermesh and Amy M. Parker. *Economics of Education Review*, August 2005, v. 24 (4) pp. 369–76.

² If you do not believe there is an effect, explain how you arrived at this conclusion. If, on the hand, you believe there is an effect, make sure you:

1. quantify its likely magnitude;
2. assess whether it is different for (a) male versus female teachers, and (b) lower- versus upper-division courses; and
3. play “devil’s advocate” and make your best case for what else might be causing the association you claim to see.