FOURTEENTH EDITION

DOWN TO EARTH SOCIOLOGY

INTRODUCTORY READINGS

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29 The Importance of Being Beautiful

SIDNEY KATZ

A chief characteristic of all societies is *social stratification,* a term that refers to a group's system of ranking. All of us find ourselves ranked according to a variety of dimensions, from our parents' social class when we are young to our own achievements, or lack thereof, when we grow older. Where we go to high school, if we attend college, and if so, where—make a difference in people's eyes. People rank us by our speech, by our walk, and even by things we own or display, from the car we drive to our hairstyles and the clothing we wear.

Central to much of the ranking done on a face-to-face level is attractiveness. Because of appearance, we judge others—and are judged by them. This type of ranking is ordinarily thought to have little consequence beyond such temporary, individual matters as whether or not we can get a date this weekend—personally significant and intense, yes, but probably of little long-term consequence. As Katz points out, however, rankings that are based on attractiveness have significant consequences for our lives.

UNLIKE MANY PEOPLE, I was neither shocked nor surprised when the national Israeli TV network fired a competent female broadcaster because she was not beautiful. I received the news with aplomb because I had just finished extensive research into "person perception" . . . the many ways in which physical attractiveness—or the lack of it—affects all aspects of your life.

Unless you're a 10—or close to it—most of you will respond to my findings with at least some feelings of frustration or perhaps disbelief. In a nutshell, you can't overestimate the importance of being beautiful. If you're beautiful, without effort you attract hordes of friends and lovers. You are given higher school grades than your smarter—but less appealing—classmates. You compete successfully for jobs against men or women who are better qualified but less alluring. Promotions and pay raises come your way more easily. You are able to go into a bank or store and cash a cheque with far less hassle than a plain Jane or John. And these are only a few of the many advantages enjoyed by those with a ravishing face and body.

"We were surprised to find that beauty had such powerful effects," confessed Karen Dion, a University of Toronto social psychologist who does person perception research. "Our findings also go against the cultural grain. People like to think that success depends on talent, intelligence, and hard work." But the scientific evidence is undeniable.

In large part, the beautiful person can attribute his or her idyllic life to a puzzling phenomenon that social scientists have dubbed the "halo effect." It defies human reason, but if you resemble Jane Fonda or Paul Newman [in their prime] it's assumed that you're more generous, trustworthy, sociable, modest, sensitive, interesting, and sexually responsive than the rest of us. Conversely, if you're somewhat physically unattractive, because of the "horns effect" you're stigmatized as being mean, sneaky, dishonest, antisocial, and a poor sport to boot.

The existence of the halo/horns effect has been established by several studies. One, by Dion, looked at perceptions of misbehavior in children.

Dion provided 243 female university students with identical detailed accounts of the misbehavior of a seven-year-old school child. She described how the youngster had pelted a sleeping dog with sharp stones until its leg bled. As the animal limped away, yelping in pain, the child continued the barrage of stones. The 243 women were asked to assess the seriousness of the child's offence and to give their impression of the child's normal behavior. Clipped to half of the reports were photos of seven-year-old boys or girls who had been rated "high" in physical attractiveness; the other half contained photos of youngsters of "low" attractiveness. "We found," said Dion, "that the opinions of the adults were markedly influenced by the appearance of the children."

One evaluator described the stone thrower, who in her report happened to be an angelic-looking little girl, in these glowing terms: "She appears to be a perfectly charming little girl, well mannered and basically unselfish. She plays well with everyone, but, like everyone else, a bad day may occur. . . . Her cruelty need not be taken too seriously." For the same offence, a homely girl evoked this comment from another evaluator: "I think this child would be quite bratty and would be a problem to teachers. She'd probably try to pick a fight with other children. . . . She would be a brat at home. All in all, she would be a real problem." The tendency throughout the 243 adult responses was to judge beautiful children as ordinarily well behaved and unlikely to engage in wanton cruelty in the future; the unbeautiful were viewed as being chronically antisocial, untrustworthy, and likely to commit similar transgressions again.

Dion found the implications of this study mind boggling. Every kid who was homely would be highly vulnerable in the classroom and elsewhere.

Prejudged by his or her appearance, a vicious cycle is set in motion. The teacher views the child as having negative traits and treats him accordingly; the child responds by conforming to the teacher's expectations. Dion thinks that adults must realize to what extent their opinion of a child can be biased by the child's appearance: "When there's a question of who started a classroom disturbance, who broke the vase—adults are more likely to identify the unattractive child as the culprit."

The same standards apply in judging adults. The beautiful are assumed innocent. John Jurens, a colorful private investigator, was once consulted by a small Toronto firm which employed 40 people. Ten thousand dollars' worth of merchandise had disappeared, and it was definitely an inside job. After an intensive investigation, which included the use of a lie detector, Jurens was certain he had caught the thief. She was 24 years old and gorgeous—a lithe princess with high cheekbones, green eyes and shining, long black hair. The employer dismissed Jurens's proof with the comment, "You've made a mistake. It just can't be her." Jurens commented sadly, "A lot of people refuse to believe that beautiful can be bad."

David Humphrey, a prominent Ontario criminal lawyer, observed, "If a beautiful woman is on trial, you practically have to show the judge and jury a movie of her committing the crime in order to get a conviction." Another experienced lawyer, Aubrey Golden, has found it difficult defending a man charged with assault or wife-beating if he's a brutish-looking hulk. By the same token, a rape victim who happens to be stocky is a less credible witness than a slender, good-looking woman.

The halo and horns effect often plays an important role in sentencing by courts. After spending 17 days observing cases heard in an Ontario traffic court, Joan Finegan, a graduate psychology student at the University of Western Ontario, concluded that pleasant and neat-looking defendants were fined an average of $6.31 less than those who were "messy." The same pro-beauty bias was found by a British investigator in a series of simulated court cases. Physically appealing defendants were given prison terms almost three years less than those meted out to unattractive ones for precisely the same offence.

Beauty—or the lack of it—influences a person's entire life. The halo and horns effect comes into play beginning with birth and continues throughout the various stages of life.

Early Life

The flawless, seraphlike infant is irresistible. It receives an inordinate amount of attention and love. The child is constantly picked up, cuddled, and

cooed to. In contrast, the unattractive baby may suffer neglect and rejection, which can have enduring effects on its personality and mental health. "When a child is unappealing because he's been born with a visible physical defect," said Dr. Ian Munro, a specialist in reconstructive facial surgery at the Hospital for Sick Children in Toronto, "parents are sometimes reluctant to touch, fondle, or give their child the normal displays of affection."

Later, when the baby attends nursery school, the halo and horns effect is even more potent. "Nursery school teachers," observed Dr. Ellen Berscheid, a psychologist who has conducted extensive person perception research at the University of Minnesota, "often insist that all children are beautiful, yet they can, when they're asked, rank their pupils by appearance." Even more noteworthy, the children themselves, despite their tender years, "behave in accordance with the adult ranking."

One nursery school study by Berscheid and Dion revealed that unattractive kids were not as well liked by their peers as the attractive ones. They were accused of "fighting a lot," "hitting other students," and "yelling at the teacher." Furthermore, other students labeled them "fraidy cats." They needed help to complete their work. When asked to name the person in class who scared them the most, the children usually nominated an unattractive classmate.

At School

It's sad but true that grade school teachers tend to judge their pupils largely on the basis of their looks. Consider the provocative study conducted by two American psychologists, Elaine Walster and Margaret Clifford: Four hundred grade five teachers were asked to examine identical report cards. They itemized the student's grades in various subjects, his or her work habits, attendance record, and attitudes. There was only one difference. Half of the report cards had the photo of an attractive boy or girl attached to the upper right-hand corner; half, the photo of a less attractive child. The teachers were then asked a number of specific questions based on the information provided. They concluded that the beautiful children had higher IQs, were more likely to go to college, and had parents who were more interested in education.

Parents should be concerned about these results. Because of an inflated opinion of the beautiful child, the teacher can be expected to give him more than his share of friendliness, encouragement, and time. And, consequently, the beautiful one will blossom—at the expense of his not-so-beautiful classmates.

The College Years

The beautiful person reaps an even richer harvest when he or she attends college. In one test, 60 male undergraduates were handed a 700-word essay on the effects of televised violence on the behavior of children. The authors, they were told, were freshmen coeds, and the undergrads were asked to assign a grade to the essay and to give their impression of the writer's abilities. Half of the students received an essay that was excellently written; the other half were given an essay that was a mishmash of clichés, grammatical errors, and sloppy writing. One-third of the papers had attached to them the photo of the alleged author—a young woman of striking beauty. Another third contained the likeness of an unappealing woman, while the remaining third were submitted without a photograph. When the evaluations were tallied, it was found that the beautiful person was consistently awarded a higher mark for her essay than the unattractive one. The essays without photos attached were usually given average marks. The investigators, David Landy and Harold Sigall, psychologists at the University of Rochester at the time of the study, concluded, "If you are ugly, you are not discriminated against as long as your performance is impressive. However, should performance be below par, attractiveness matters: you may be able to get away with inferior work if you are beautiful."

Not surprisingly, college students also preferred beauty when grading the desirability of a date. In interviews 376 young men and 376 young women assured investigators that it was "vulgar" to judge people by their appearance. They then proceeded to list the human qualities that they really valued; intelligence, friendliness, sincerity, "soul," and warmth. Yet when these same people were interviewed after going out on a blind date that was arranged by a computer, it became apparent that they were blind to everything *but* the physical appearance of their partners. The more beautiful the partner, the more he or she was liked. Features such as exceptional personality, high intelligence, and shared interests hardly seemed to count at all. "We were surprised to find that a *man's* physical attractiveness was the largest determinant of how well he was liked by a woman," observed Elaine Walster, one of the psychologists who conducted the study.

In addition to giving top marks to their beautiful classmates as dates, college students also predict glittering futures for them. In one study by Dion, Berscheid, and Walster, the opinion was almost unanimous that the physically appealing would contract better marriages, make better husbands and wives, and lead more fulfilling social and career lives. This finding is all the more impressive, Dion explained, because "the unattractive people in

our sample were by no means at the extremes of unattractiveness—they possessed only a minor flaw to their beauty."

Marriage

It's logical that a beautiful person's marriage should be idyllic. An alluring woman, say, might have a busier social life than her less appealing sisters and therefore have a better chance of meeting a compatible mate. She's also apt to be more sexually responsive. Good-looking women fall in love more often and have more sexual experiences than others. "And," observed Berscheid, "since in almost all areas of human endeavor practice makes perfect, it may well be that beautiful women are indeed sexually warmer simply because of experience."

One thing is certain: the power of beauty is such that the status of even a homely man skyrockets if he marries a dazzling woman. People discover positive qualities in him they never before noticed: self-confidence, likability, friendliness. Sigall and Landy refer to this phenomenon as "a generalized halo effect" and offer this explanation: "People viewing individuals who are romantically linked to an attractive person try to make sense of the association. In effect, they may ask themselves, 'Why is *she*, desirable as she appears to be, involved with him?' The observers may answer the question by attributing favorable qualities to him."

Careers

If you're a good-looking male over six feet tall, don't worry about succeeding at your career.

A study of university graduates by the *Wall Street Journal* revealed that well proportioned wage earners who were six-foot-two or taller earned 12 percent more than men under six feet. "For some reason," explained Ronald Burke, a York University psychologist and industrial consultant, "tall men are assumed to be dynamic, decisive, and powerful. In other words, born leaders." A Toronto consultant for Drake Personnel, one of the largest employment agencies in Canada, recalled trying to find a sales manager for an industrial firm. He sent four highly qualified candidates, only to have them all turned down. "The fifth guy I sent over was different," said the consultant. "He stood six-foot-four. He was promptly hired."

The well favored woman also has a distinct edge when it comes to getting a job she's after. "We send out three prospects to be interviewed, and

it's almost always the most glamorous one that's hired," said Edith Geddes of the Personnel Centre, a Toronto agency that specializes in female placements. "We sometimes feel bad because the best qualified person is not chosen." Dr. Pam Ennis, a consultant to several large corporations, observed, "Look at the photos announcing promotions in the *Globe and Mail* business section. It's no accident that so many of the women happen to be attractive and sexy-looking." Ennis, an elegant woman herself, attributes at least part of her career success to good looks. Her photograph appears on the brochures she mails out to companies soliciting new clients. "About eight out of 10 company presidents give me an appointment," she said. "I'm sure that many of them are curious to see me in person. Beauty makes it easier to establish rapport."

In an experiment designed to test the effect of stating or not stating an intent to change the listener's point of view, it was discovered that an attractive woman was more persuasive than an unattractive woman. In one session, an attractive woman disguised her good looks. Her dress was ill-fitting, she wore no makeup on her oily skin, her hair was a tattered mess, and the trace of a moustache was etched on her upper lip. She attempted to persuade a classroom of men that a general education was superior to a specialized one. Her arguments, in large part, failed to change their points of view.

The same woman then made herself as alluring as possible. She wore chic, tight-fitting clothes and tasteful makeup, and sported a fashionable coiffeur. Using the identical argument, she had little difficulty in persuading a second group of men to share her enthusiasm for a general education.

Old Age

An elderly person's attractiveness influences the way in which he or she is treated in nursing homes and hospitals. Doctors and nurses give better care to the beautiful ones.

Lena Nordholm, an Australian behavioral scientist, presented 289 doctors, nurses, social workers, speech therapists, and physiotherapists with photos of eight attractive and unattractive men and women. They were asked to speculate about what kind of patients they would be. The good-lookers were judged to be more cooperative, better motivated, and more likely to improve than their less attractive counterparts. Pam Ennis, the consultant, commented, "Because the doctor feels that beautiful patients are more likely to respond to his treatment, he'll give them more time and attention."

In the myths that shape modern civilization, beauty is equated with success. It has been that way since time began. In most of literature, the

heroines are beautiful. Leo Tolstoy wrote, "It is amazing how complete is the delusion that beauty is goodness."

We like to think we have moved beyond the era when the most desirable woman was the beauty queen, but we haven't. Every day we make assumptions about the personality of the bank teller, the delivery man, or the waitress by their looks. The way in which we attribute good and bad characteristics still has very little to do with fact. People seldom look beyond a pleasing facade, a superficial attractiveness. But the professors of person perception are not discouraged by this. They want to educate us. Perhaps by arming us with the knowledge and awareness of why we discriminate against the unattractive, we'll learn how to prevent this unwitting bigotry. Just maybe, we can change human nature.