“A Thing of Beauty is a Joy Forever”? Returns to Physical Attractiveness over the Life Course

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This article was a study about the effect that physical attractiveness has on men and women. It is measuring the success of physical attractiveness on socio-economic status and marital success over the life course. Attractiveness is measured for both women and men by facial attractiveness, Body Mass Index, and height. The author finds this subject important because he suggests physical attractiveness matters throughout a person’s life course and it should be further studied.

The type of method this research was conducted by was “Observation”. It was, more specifically, nonparticipant observation because the researcher was not part of the group he was experimenting. He made sure he had no influence at all in the decisions his participants were making. There was some interviewing done by the researcher and it was mainly to collect data. The downside to observational research is that all of this data may be collected, but in reality, because it is such a concentrated and focused group it cannot be generalized. This means that whatever conclusion is derived from this research, it may not apply to the whole population, but only to this small sample of people.

The researcher chose a group from the Wisconsin Longitudinal Study (WLS), which is a study of a sample of 10,317 men, and women who graduated from Wisconsin high schools in 1957. All the participants were randomly chosen. The author claims “[i]nterviews with the respondents or their parents were conducted in 1957, 1964, 1975, 1992/1993, and 2004.” Their facial attractiveness were based on respondents’ high school yearbook pictures taken when they were around 18. A panel of six males and six females rated each photo. The data was collected up until the respondents were in their mid 60s. Again, in their sixties they were rated on attractiveness. Throughout the study,
the author provides graphs that show the respondents’ socio-economic status, and their spouse’s personal income as well.

The author uses an Evolutionary Psychology approach because he claims that humans will naturally choose mates that possess skills for survival. These traits are considered attractive traits and one of the most common traits is health and being healthy-looking. He uses an example about infants naturally preferring attractive people over unattractive people. Another approach the author took was Social Psychology and he referred to the “what is beautiful is good” stereotype. The author claims that “not only are physically (un)attractive individuals perceived more (un)attractive favorably by others, they may also change their personality in response to these outside perceptions.” This means that all this positivity for attractive people will facilitate success and help them obtain long-term returns to physical attractiveness.

In the end, we find out that physical attractiveness has an impact on the way that people will act, so it matters throughout a person’s life. Also, physical attractiveness matters differently to women and men. We find out that women will most likely look for a male of high quality or one that can supply enough to meet her materialistic needs. In regards to the study, we find out that in men, being taller will result in higher earnings than shorter men throughout their careers. The author states “the effect of an increase in height of one standard deviation is associated with an increase in earnings of about 13-15 percent of a standard deviation in the distribution of earnings at ages 35 and 54.” One explanation from this, however, may be genetics. This may mean that the young male was taller since childhood, and to be healthy he had to eat more; therefore, by receiving more nutrients, the nutrients raised his intelligence and helped him be more successful.
For women, an attractive face and lower Body Mass Index will result in higher socio-economic status late in their careers. Although they are high in status, their earnings are not affected by their attractiveness. A more attractive woman may end up with a more prestigious occupation than the less attractive one, but this does not guarantee higher earnings. Another conclusion is that men and women with more attractive faces are more likely to be married in youth. Being more attractive means there is greater likelihood to marry at the age of 25. The facial attractiveness is equally important to men and women. Finally, physical attractiveness is unrelated to the income and socio-economic status of their spouses at any time over the life course.

The reason I chose to read this article is out of curiosity. It mainly started when I would talk to my friends and to my sisters about people we saw on television with talent and people with no talent whatsoever. We were talking about pretty people and not-so-attractive people. We decided that being pretty would get someone very far even if they had no skills or talent. I also noticed two of my friends that turned in the same homework assignment with the same answers and one received a point higher than the other. My friend with the lower score wondered why she did not receive the same grade, and my friend with the higher score said, “because the teacher likes me” and I wondered “can this be true?” And “why?”

When I decided to find a research topic I knew that’s what I wanted to research. It was not very easy because there aren’t very many articles I could find on this specific topic. I searched through a few articles and they were not what I was looking for, and finally I came across this one. I liked the fact that it explained how it measured the data and the conclusion was very clear. I did not like the fact that the study was done on a
group of people from one state. I would have preferred a larger group of people from
different places that way it can be taken to the next level of research. Each state is just
very different, so maybe living in certain places has an effect as well. Overall, I would
recommend it because of the idea of the experiment.