

Comments on “The Role of Beauty in the Labor Market”

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Overall, this dissertation certainly warrants a defense and the eventual awarding of a degree. My comments and suggestions on the individual essays follow.

First essay.

The experiment is straightforward and well designed, and the results are convincing. A strength of the experiment is that the attractive and unattractive photos chosen are not extreme (at least by my estimation); that is, the attractive photos are not stunningly handsome or beautiful, and the unattractive people are not particularly homely. This increases the external validity of the experiment; as it is not driven by employers’ reaction to very extreme, but seldom observed, levels of attractiveness or unattractiveness.

The author should tell readers whether it common to include a photograph on applications for this type of position in Germany. If not, again, the external validity of the experiment may be reduced.

The author should say something about the nature of these internships, and the relationship between the firm and the intern that they imply. In the US, interns are often understood to be temporary employees, and no promise of longer term employment is implied. Further, it is often the case that the tasks they are given are somewhat less demanding and less important than those that would be given to them were they being hired (with the same background) as permanent employees. If discrimination is taste based, one would expect employers to be more likely to indulge their taste for discrimination when hiring for these sorts of positions than when hiring for positions that lead to a longer attachment between firm and worker—the cost of having a potentially less qualified worker for the sake of attractiveness is lower if the employment relationship is expected to be shorter and the tasks assigned to the worker are likely to be menial relative to the overall abilities of the applicants being considered. If this is the case in Germany, it would suggest that perhaps we will see more looks-based discrimination in this setting than in the process of hiring for permanent jobs. If so, this does not mean that the author’s results are not interesting, but the possibility should be mentioned.

Second essay

Again, the study is well done, and the results interesting and persuasive.

On page 47, it is not clear whether the correlation between beauty and intelligence mentioned at the top of the page is between beauty and measured intelligence, or beauty and perceived intelligence. It should probably also be mentioned that Biddle and Hamermesh (1998) found no correlation between beauty and measures of intellectual ability in their sample of lawyers. I say more about the importance for this paper of the perceived vs; the actual correlation between beauty and intelligence.

On page 49 were the beauty ratings based on photographs of the respondents? (This is mentioned later, but should be mentioned here). If so, what were the photographs like? Facial? Black and White? Taken at the time of the interview? How large? What instructions were given to the raters? In particular, were they asked to adjust of the age of the person in the photograph?

In discussing the results, the author should probably first report and discuss the raw correlation coefficient between intelligence and beauty – perhaps even estimate a regression with intelligence as the dependent variable. If the correlation is positive (as it very likely is, given the way the estimated beauty premium changes after the additional of intelligence to the regression) this is noteworthy. Given that the paper is about beauty as a signal for intelligence, the measured correlation between intelligence and beauty tells us something about whether it is rational to use beauty as a signal for intelligence. The author talks about studies showing that people “attribute” intelligence to attractive people, but it is equally important to know whether this is a rational attribution, as it would be if beauty really is correlated with intelligence. How does the correlation in this data set compare with beauty-intelligence correlations in other data sets? (Presumably, the data used in Zebrowitz et. al. allowed such a correlation to be calculated, and there may be other studies that do so as well). If the correlation is stronger than that reported in the previous literature, one might also wonder whether there is a social class component to the raters’ assessments of beauty. (See the previous comment on the nature of the photographs. If the raters can see how the people are dressed, this transmits information about class, as do hairstyles, make-up, and, in some cultures, darkness of complexion. The statement on p. 63 that photo raters have no information about the respondent’s social status is probably too strong).

In table 3 in the medium tenure group, the coefficients on beauty are barely larger than their standard errors, so should not be designated as statistically significant at the 10% level.

Third Essay

Another interesting essay; and can be made even better, I think. .

On page 88, the author should provide some measures of the inter-rater similarities, e.g., Kronbach’s alpha or the average correlation coefficient between pairs of raters. It would also be interesting to compare the distribution of scores for this high income, high achievement sample to the distributions of scores observed in broader based samples used in beauty studies.

On page 90, the reason for including company characteristics is not to control for measurement error, but to lower the residual variance of the regression and perhaps reduce omitted variable bias.

Also, I do not know what “the level of the non qualified wage” means, but I am fairly certain that the intercept of this regression has no interesting interpretation.

In the regression reported in table 1, it might be interesting to look at a regression that excluded the controls for firm size and firm performance. If the estimated beauty effect grows, this may indicate that more attractive people are more likely to get the “better” CEO jobs (those at larger

firms) or have a positive effect on firm performance. If so, the data could potentially be used to explore this possibility further.

Pg. 93: Return on Assets for one year is a very noisy measure of firm performance, so looking the evidence that insertion of this variable in the regression does not affect the beauty coefficient does not really convincingly eliminate the productivity hypothesis. I would think that a more convincing and still feasible test would average the firm performance measure over several previous years (all years in which the current CEO was in charge, of course), perhaps after norming the annual performance measure by the average return within the appropriate industry or sector for the year. Then use the multi-year firm performance measure as a dependent variable in a model that includes the beauty measure. In my opinion, a strong test like this of the beauty/productivity relationship would be a real contribution, along the lines of (but an improvement on) the Hamermesh, et. al. paper looking at advertising executives in *Economic Letters*, 2000.

Pg. 94. The use of “beauty hungry” industries to test the productivity hypothesis seems much less appropriate here compared to the first two chapters. The measure of “beauty hunger” is based on the activities of the typical rank and file worker in an industry, and their interactions with the customers of the industry’s product; they are probably not applicable at all to the typical duties of a CEO in the industry.

Pg. 96-97: I think that the test described and reported here could be done more efficiently in the context of a single regression equation with interactions between the beauty measure and the experience/tenure dummies.