

A ‘Halo’ Effect for Inference of Managerial Ability from Physical Appearance

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Abstract

Physically attractive people are assumed to have more pleasing personalities and better social skills than less attractive people (the ‘halo’ effect). Also, interpersonal skills are known to be important for managers. The present study examines the premise that, absent other information, attractive people will be perceived to have more managerial ability than less attractive people. Six color photos of male politicians were used as stimulus material. Separate groups of respondents ranked or rated the men in these photos for handsomeness and inferred managerial ability and were asked to explain their response. A ‘halo’ effect for inferred managerial ability was supported. Rank order correlation of the photos for handsomeness and managerial ability was positive and significant ($p \leq .01$). Respondents seemed to first develop an affective reaction to the men in the photos, leading to inference of personality traits and then estimation of managerial ability.

Keywords: attractiveness stereotype, impression formation, social cognition, nonverbal communication

Introduction

Being physically attractive in our society has many benefits for the possessor. Good looking people are assumed to have more pleasing personalities, better social skills, and lead happier lives than less attractive people (the physical attractiveness stereotype, Dion, Berscheid, & Walster, 1972; Eagly, Ashmore, Makhijani, & Longo, 1991). Additionally, attractive people are preferred over less attractive people in job hiring situations (Dipboye, Fromkin, & Wiback, 1975) in sales encounters (Reingen & Kernan, 1993) and service encounters (Magnini, Baker, & Karande, 2013), and attractive employees are more likely to receive favorable performance evaluations than their less attractive colleagues (Coutts & Gruman, 2012). Indeed, the favorable treatment of the good looking and the ill treatment of the less attractive in employment situations has been labeled legalized appearance discrimination (Harvard Law Review, 1987).

The present study explores an additional hypothesized benefit of physical attractiveness – the idea that physically attractive people will be assumed to have more managerial ability than less attractive people (absent other information). This premise is based, in part, on the physical attractiveness stereotype just mentioned (also called the ‘halo’ effect, Dion et al., 1972; Eagly et al., 1991). Research on this stereotype finds that attractive people are inferred to have better social skills than the less attractive (Dion et al., 1972). Since interpersonal skill has been conceptualized as a core skill needed by managers (Katz, 1974) this suggests that, absent other information, physically attractive people will be assumed to have more managerial skill than less attractive people because they are believed to possess more social skill. This particular premise does not appear to have been investigated in the literature. The present study finds significant evidence for a ‘halo’ effect in a managerial context. The responses of separate groups ranking color ‘headshot’ photos of men for handsomeness and inferred managerial ability significantly correlate. Later, separate groups evaluate a single photo of a man and rate him for various aspects of managerial skill. When the mean ratings from this exercise are ranked, they significantly correlate with the handsomeness rankings obtained earlier. Demonstration that people can form an estimate of managerial ability for a man from a photo may have implications, if estimation is similar to expectation. Expectations have been shown to greatly influence evaluation of subsequent behavior (Kelley, 1950; Nickerson, 1998). That is, different people can observe the same evidence and reach different conclusions, depending on their pre-existing beliefs (the confirmation bias). Therefore, first impression of a manager from a photo may have a more longer-lasting influence than might be thought.

The current investigation contributes to the literature by demonstrating the effect of the physical attractiveness stereotype on inference of managerial ability and exploring the inference process to suggest a possible sequence of events. Further, expectation of managerial ability is linked to the confirmation bias effect which could have significant implications for managers.

The 'Halo' Effect

The term 'halo' effect was coined by Thorndike (1920) to refer to a judgment bias affecting supervisor ratings of worker performance. The author investigated ratings given by flight commanders to aviation cadets, noting that correlations among the four dimensions evaluated (physical qualities, intelligence, leadership, and character) were all very high and extremely similar to each other. Further, the rating for technical ability as a flyer had an average correlation with a composite rating of the above four qualities of .67. Thorndike considered this unrealistic because flying ability was a highly specialized skill that should not be so highly correlated to a rating of general merit. He concluded that evaluators formed an overall impression of an individual and allowed this 'halo' to influence their ratings of more specialized attributes.

The properties of the 'halo' effect were investigated in depth by Asch (1946) in a series of experiments. The author confirmed the existence of the phenomenon, also finding that judgment bias is more likely to be restricted to a set of attributes complimentary to that quality which first impressed the evaluator. In discussing his findings, Asch emphasizes that humans form holistic impressions of other people and that attributes are perceived in dynamic relation to each other. Further, he seems to suggest that the mechanism for the judgment bias might be a combination of the need to form a holistic impression and also to maintain cognitive consistency – our desire to keep our beliefs in a harmonious and ordered state with each other.

More recently, the term 'halo' effect has been used to refer to the physical attractiveness stereotype - a tendency to infer that physically attractive people also rate favorably on other dimensions, such as having a pleasing personality, social competence, greater likelihood of marriage, and more social and professional happiness in life (Dion et al., 1972). The cited authors confirmed a "what is beautiful is good" thesis in their classic study, finding that physically attractive people (both men and women) are perceived significantly more favorably than less attractive people, and this perception is independent of the gender of the observer.

Publication of the physical attractiveness stereotype stimulated much more investigation, perhaps partly due to the inherent unfairness of the stereotype, biasing judgments against people who do not possess a pleasing face. However, meta-analytic reviews (Eagly et al., 1991; Feingold, 1992) find robust evidence for the stereotype, at least for inferences in the general area of social competence and interpersonal ease, though inferences from physical appearance are less likely to extend to intellectual competence, and the stereotype has little to no impact on inferences about integrity or concern for others.

The 'Halo' Effect in Business

As the reader might anticipate from the description of the discovery of the 'halo' effect, this judgment bias has been a topic of concern for business. Indeed, it has been stated that the 'halo' effect is the most common bias in performance appraisal of subordinates (Coutts and Gruman, 2012). For example, favorable supervisor perception of an employee on one characteristic (enthusiasm) might spill over and influence the rating of the employee on a different characteristic (technical ability). This source of error can be lowered by training supervisors in how to evaluate employees (Borman, 1975).

As it does in other aspects of life, physical attractiveness has benefits for the possessor in business as well. Physically attractive job candidates are significantly preferred over unattractive candidates (Dipboye et al., 1975). More specifically, in a study of the relative influence of physical attractiveness in actual hiring decisions, Raza and Carpenter (1987) collected rating evaluations for 171 job applicants, modeling physical attractiveness, likability, intelligence, skill, and employability as predictors for hire-ability in path analysis. Attractiveness was positively and significantly correlated to hire-ability, exhibited a highly significant influence on likeability, but had less impact on hire-ability than skill, intelligence, and likeability.

Sales and service encounters have the potential to bring customers and employees into close contact, suggesting a potential influence for employee physical attractiveness in these situations. Indeed, Reingen and Kernan (1993) report that physically attractive salespeople (both men and women) are perceived significantly more favorably than less attractive salespeople on traits associated with selling.

Further, attractive sellers were more likely to be given an opportunity to demonstrate their product, and purchase intention in this situation was significantly greater than when the salesperson was less attractive. Finally, attractive solicitors for a charitable donation were more effective than less attractive solicitors (a significantly greater percentage of contacted people donated, 42% versus 23%, although the average amount of the donation did not differ between the two conditions). The authors conclude that it is not surprising that sales organizations use “good appearance” as a selection criterion for job applicants.

In a service encounter context, Magnini et al. (2013) found that people reported significantly more service quality assurance in a simulated encounter with a front desk employee at a full service hotel when that employee was attractive versus unattractive. McColl and Truong (2013) reported significantly greater customer satisfaction in a service recovery scenario when the service representative was attractive versus less attractive. Luoh and Tsaor (2009) manipulated restaurant server attractiveness (attractive versus average) in a scenario, finding that attractive servers resulted in a significantly greater perception of service quality. The latter study was conducted in Taiwan, suggesting that the ‘halo’ effect is not limited to Western culture.

In seeking to explain why customers would perceive more service quality when served by an attractive versus a less attractive employee, Sundaram and Webster (2000) suggest that this is a direct consequence of the physical attractiveness stereotype. That is, given that service encounters are social situations and that attractive service providers are inferred to have more social ‘power’ (pleasing personality, social competence, interpersonal ease) than less attractive providers, then it is logical that customers would prefer encounters with attractive employees over less attractive employees. Stated somewhat differently, social interaction with an attractive (versus less attractive) employee results in more positive affect for the customer. Positive affect would then, presumably, lead to an enhanced level of satisfaction.

Managerial Ability

Writing for an aptitude testing and career-counseling organization and summarizing 20 years of research by that group, Broadley and Broadley (1948, pp. 12-19) discuss the talents needed by an effective administrator. First on the list is a personality that is not decidedly introverted. This is a requirement because managers work through their employees; they must enjoy being around people and have a good understanding of human behavior. The second needed skill is abstract visualization – the ability to look at a situation and see not just details but how all the elements fit into the larger picture. This ability is useful in foreseeing problems that might arise from changes in the way of doing things. Although these are the two most important talents, it is helpful for managers to also have a large and precise vocabulary (so as to better communicate and command respect) and some adeptness with paper work.

Within management literature, Katz (1974) suggests that administrators need three sets of skills: conceptual skill, human relation skill, and technical skill. The first of these, conceptual skill, is similar to the abstract visualization ability identified by the Broadleys. It is the ability to analyze problems, see causes and not symptoms, and generate a feasible solution. The second, human relation skill, is the ability to work with, understand, and motivate other people. This criterion is somewhat similar to the extrovert condition mentioned by the Broadleys. The third skill, technical skill, consists of knowledge of the operations being managed (procedures and processes of the physical operations). Katz notes that the importance of the three skills varies depending on level of management within the organization. Although human relation skill is needed at all levels of management, technical skill is more important than conceptual skill at the supervisor level while at the top level of management conceptual skill is more important than technical skill.

A proprietary assessment of managerial skill is the Management Skills Profile (developed by Personnel Decisions, Inc., of Minneapolis, MN) which focuses on behaviors rather than style of management (Buttner, Gryskiewicz, & Hildore, 1999). This instrument consists of 122 scaled items in a questionnaire organized into 19 skill areas and 8 dimensions of management (planning and organizing, leadership, interpersonal relations, communications, personal adaptability, personal motivation, technical knowledge, and problem solving).

Interestingly, all three cited sources on managerial ability agree on interpersonal skills and problem solving ability as being core requirements for the job. Two of the sources agree on technical skills as being necessary. Although one source, Broadley and Broadley (1948), does not mention technical skill, this may have been due to the management level they were commenting about (the executive).

Katz (1974) points out that technical knowledge is not really needed at the executive level, assuming the executive has subordinates who understand the physical operations. For brevity and consistency, this paper will focus on the following three managerial skills: technical skill, human relation skill, and conceptual skill.

The Present Study

Given that attractive people are assumed to have a more pleasing personality, greater social competence, and interpersonal ease (the 'halo' effect, Dion et al., 1972) and that interpersonal skill is a core requirement for managers (Katz, 1974), it seems likely that attractive people (versus less attractive people) would be perceived to have a greater level of managerial skill, at least at the zero-acquaintance stage. This is the central premise of this paper. Although this particular topic does not appear to have received academic investigation, it seems worthy of such effort.

The central proposition of this paper is explored in a pre-test and a main study. In the pre-test, a set of six photographs of men is presented to two separate groups, asking one group to rank the men in the photos for handsomeness while the other group ranks the men on inferred managerial ability. If the central premise is correct, the rank orderings among the two groups should correlate. This leads to the first hypothesis:

H1. Stimulus photos of men ranked by separate groups for handsomeness and inferred managerial ability will have a significant, positive monotonic correlation.

The main study presents individual photos of each man to six separate groups, asking respondents to rate the man in the photo on each of the three managerial skills, give a global rating of managerial ability, rate how much they would want the man in the photo to be their own supervising manager, and to explain what they viewed in the photo that caused them to respond as they did. If the central premise is correct, the average rating for overall managerial effectiveness in the main study should correlate with the handsomeness rankings obtained in the pre-test. This leads to the second hypothesis:

H2. Rating results for inferred managerial ability in the main study will have a significant, positive correlation with ranking results for handsomeness obtained in the pre-test.

Of the three managerial skills (technical knowledge, interpersonal skill, and problem solving ability) estimated for each man in the photos in the main study, interpersonal skill is of special interest. This ability is most closely aligned with personality, and personality inference is the primary inference arising from the physical attractiveness stereotype (Eagly et al., 1991). This suggests that, among the three managerial skills rated, interpersonal skill will be the most potent predictor and account for the most explained variance in overall inferred managerial ability. This forms the basis for the third hypothesis:

H3. When overall managerial ability is regressed on the three predictor variables of technical knowledge, interpersonal skill, and problem solving ability, interpersonal skill will be the most potent predictor and account for the most variance explained in the dependent variable.

Pre-Test

The primary purpose of the pre-test was to select the photo stimuli to be used in the main study. However, it was also designed to be an initial proof-of-concept of the central premise of this paper – that physically attractive people are perceived to have more managerial ability than less attractive people when the evaluator is not acquainted with the person being evaluated.

Stimulus color photographs of U.S. congressmen were obtained from Ballotpedia.org, a political website (http://ballotpedia.org/United_States_Congress_elections,_2012). The practice of sourcing photographs of politicians as stimulus material for the investigation of the effect of physical appearance has been used by other researchers (Todorov, Mandisodza, Goren, & Hall, 2005). Six photographs believed to represent a range of facial appearance were selected from the website and this constituted the final stimulus set.

None of the congressmen in the photos were of national prominence, and none were from the state in which this investigation was conducted. All photographs were 'headshot' views of men dressed in a suit coat with shirt and tie. All men were of a similar ethnic background (Caucasian) and none exhibited facial hair. All of the men expressed at least some smile showing their teeth, although the smile of #3 was unusual in being slightly downturned. One of the six men (#1) was wearing glasses, and one of the six (#2) had a receding hairline. Ages of the men in the photos are uncertain, but are estimated to range from about 40 to 50 years of age.

Although members of congress are often photographed against a U.S. flag in the background and wearing their congressional lapel pin (which clearly identifies them as members of congress), care was taken to exclude any photos that contained either of these elements.

The six photos were reproduced in color on a single questionnaire page (with an identifying number) with instructions to subjects to list the numbered photos in order of “physical attractiveness (handsomeness)” of the person in the photo. A convenience sample of 22 subjects (mostly undergraduate college students with some working adults) completed this exercise. A second convenience sample of 20 subjects (all undergraduate students) were presented with a slightly altered version of the questionnaire containing the same six photos and instructions to list the photos “in order of who you think would be the most effective manager.” All color photos were reproduced at a size of 2.5 by 2.0625 inches.

Main Study

The same photos used in the pre-test were used in the main study. Each photo was reproduced at the same size and in color. However, this time each respondent viewed only a single photo and answered a more detailed questionnaire. Scaled items (-5 to +5 with zero as neutral) addressed inferred managerial technical knowledge, interpersonal skill, problem solving ability, perceived overall effectiveness as a manager, and how much the respondent would want the man in the photo to be their supervising manager. Finally, the respondent was asked to explain what they viewed in the photo that led them to want (or not want) the manager shown in the photo to be their manager. The questionnaire concluded with some demographic items.

The final convenience sample of 135 for the main study consisted of 66 working adults (university employees who received and returned the questionnaire through campus mail, average age of 47.48 years \pm 10.83 years) and 69 undergraduate students (who completed the questionnaire during class time, average age of 20.41 years \pm 1.47 years). Each group viewing a single photo consisted of 22 to 24 subjects. Although there is no *a priori* reason to think that students would respond differently to the questionnaire than working adults (the original publication of the attractiveness stereotype by Dion used undergraduate students), it was believed desirable to have a range of age in respondents.

Not included in the final sample are 33 questionnaires that were returned in a complete state, but in which all scale items were marked at the neutral point and in which the respondent had written in “you can’t judge a book by its cover” or something similar. These subjects were interpreted to have effectively opted-out of the study. The described behavior may be related to social desirability bias. In effect, these subjects are saying that to form an opinion of someone based purely on appearance is inappropriate.

Results

Rank sums from the pre-test are shown in Figure 1. The paired columns for each photo show a close correspondence between the obtained rank sums. For the central premise of this paper to hold merit, the monotonic (rank order) correlation for the photos by the two groups should be significant and positive. This was found to be true; Spearman’s rho is a perfect 1.00, confirming H1.

Rating results for the three administrator skills are shown in Figure 2. A general pattern of response is for perceived problem solving ability to be rated less than interpersonal skill. This is true except for #1 and #3 (and the latter was rated unusually low on interpersonal skill). In the case of #1, this was the only man wearing glasses, and this may have led to him being perceived differently. In fact, a “glasses” stereotype has been reported in the literature (Harris, Harris, &Bochner, 1982) in which people wearing glasses are more likely to be perceived as intelligent, industrious, and reliable, but less outgoing or athletic as people not wearing glasses. This may have led to him being relatively highly rated for problem solving ability.

The other dependent variables from the main study, inferred overall managerial ability and the degree to which the respondent would want the person shown in the photo as their manager, are shown in Figure 3. The general pattern of inferred managerial ability established in the pre-test (with #4 ranked best manager and #3 ranked worst) is maintained in the rating results of the main study. The monotonic correlation (Spearman’s rho) between the handsomeness rank results of the pre-test and the rating means for managerial ability in the main study is .94 ($p = .01$), confirming H2. The correlation likely would have been higher had not respondents, perhaps cued that problem solving ability is an important managerial skill by items in the questionnaire evaluated the man wearing glasses slightly more favorably.

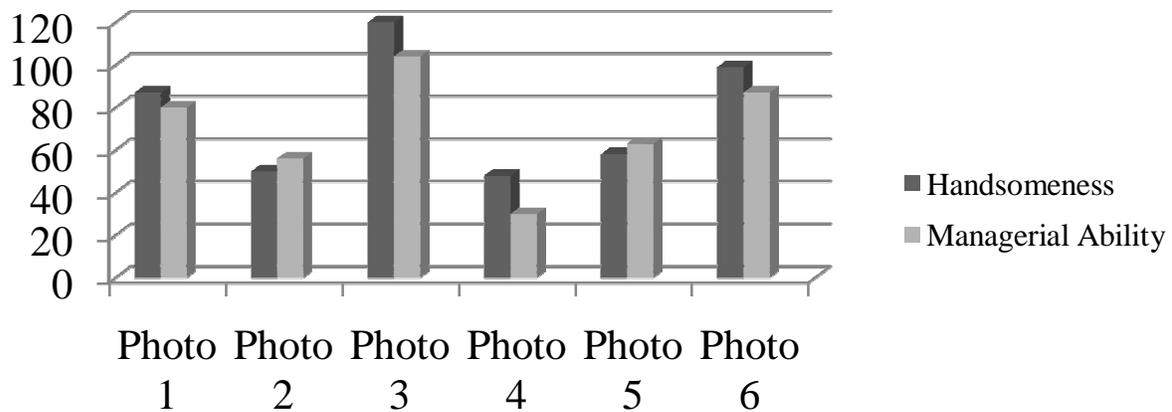


Figure 1: Rank sum results from the pre-test. One group of subjects viewed photos of six men and ranked them for relative handsomeness while another group was shown the same photos and asked to rank them for inferred managerial ability. The number of subjects per group is 22 and 20. The monotonic correlation (Spearman’s rho) between the rankings for handsomeness and managerial ability is a perfect 1.00.

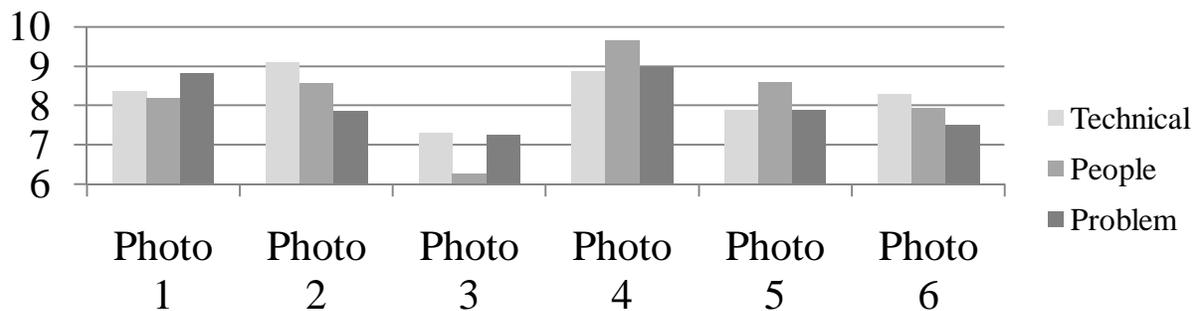


Figure 2: Rating variable means from the main study for inferred technical knowledge, interpersonal skill, and problem solving ability. The scale for each attribute was -5 to +5 with zero as neutral. Raw data were recoded as 1 to 11. The number of subjects viewing each photo ranged from 22 to 24.

A result pattern shown in Figure 3 is that all means for desirability as the respondent’s supervising manager are lower than for general effectiveness as a manager (paired samples t-test, $t = 6.49$, $df = 134$, $p < .001$). This is interesting because respondents are evaluating the same person for the same managerial ability but in two different contexts. There appears to be a “risk” adjustment in respondent thinking when the context is personal. That is, respondents are more guarded in stating whether they would want the man in the photo to be their manager versus giving a hypothetical estimate of the man’s managerial ability.

An objective of the main study was to determine the relative influence of the three managerial skills identified by Katz (1974) on overall inferred managerial ability. The implicit personality corollary of the attractiveness stereotype (Eagly et al., 1991) suggests that respondents are most comfortable estimating the personality of the men in the photos and this would result in perceived interpersonal skill having a larger influence than technical knowledge or problem solving ability. Regression analysis confirmed this, supporting H3. The overall regression model was significant ($F = 142.46$, $df = 3,131$, $p < .001$) with the three predictors explaining 76.5% of variance in overall managerial ability. Interpersonal skill had the largest standardized beta coefficient (.429 versus .302 and .273) and it also had the largest t-value (7.28 versus 5.20 and 4.33). All beta coefficients for the predictors were significant at $p < .001$. The influence of interpersonal skill becomes even more apparent when the dependent variable is changed to the degree to which the respondent would want the man shown in the photo to be their manager. Here, the overall regression model is still significant ($F = 44.41$, $df = 3,131$, $p < .001$) with the predictors explaining 50.4% of variance, but interpersonal skill is the only significant predicting variable (t-value of 6.50 versus 0.529 and 1.842).

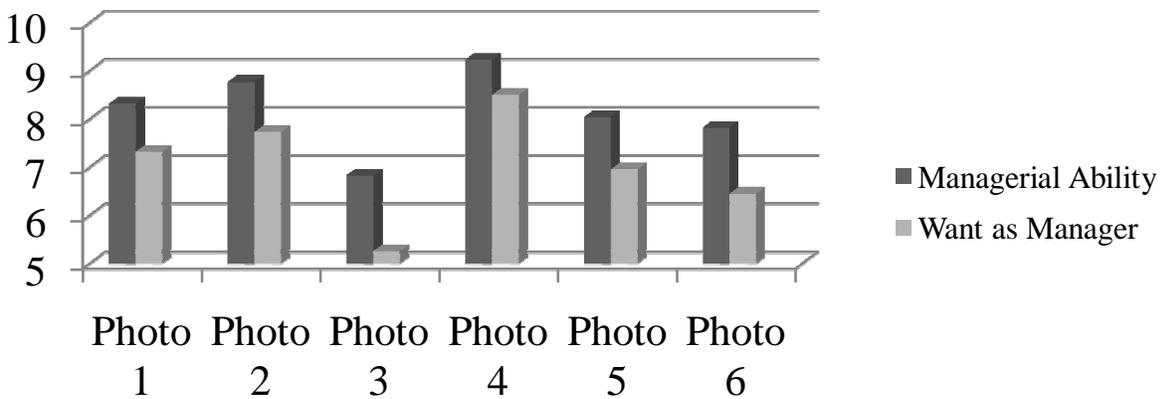


Figure 3: Dependent variable means from the main study for inferred managerial ability and degree to which the respondent would want the man shown in the photo as their supervising manager. The scale for each attribute was -5 to +5 with zero as neutral. Raw data were recoded as 1 to 11. The number of subjects viewing each photo ranged from 22 to 24.

Evaluation of open-ended comments in which respondents explained why they would or would not want the man shown in the photo as their manager was revealing. Subjects seemed to develop a general affective reaction toward the person in the photo and this guided their comments. For example, #4 did not have any negative comments. He was characterized as having “kind” looks, a “compassionate” expression, a “friendly” demeanor, and a “good smile.” This individual was ranked as the most handsome as well as the most able manager in the pre-test and he was rated as the most effective manager in the main study. In contrast, #3 engendered mostly negative comments. He was said to have a “forced smile”, a “hard to read” expression, and his “eyes and smile do not look relaxed.” This individual was ranked lowest for handsomeness and managerial ability in the pre-test and rated lowest in managerial effectiveness in the main study. In the case of #5, respondents seemed unable to reach an affective consensus. It was said that his “smile does not appear genuine” and that he was “superficial” and “fake” looking, while other comments note that he “looks friendly” and has a “warm smile” and appears “fun.” Among the six stimuli, #1 (wearing glasses) was unusual for eliciting essentially no affect-laden comments. However, respondents mentioned that he looked “professional” and “intelligent.”

The last data analysis was a check to determine if the genders significantly differed in their ratings on any of the dependent variables for any photo. This was found to be true for #4. Women rated this man significantly more favorably than men on 3 of 5 variables (technical knowledge, problem solving skill, and overall effectiveness as a manager). Although the rating difference for interpersonal skill was in the same direction, it was not quite significant ($p = .059$). Interestingly, the genders did not significantly differ in the degree to which they would want this man as their manager. None of the other men in photos elicited a significant gender difference in their ratings, except for #6, which exhibited a pattern almost the inverse of #4. Women rated this man significantly more favorably than men only on the variable of wanting the person as their supervising manager ($p = .026$).

Discussion

Given the demonstrated effect of the physical attractiveness stereotype in other business contexts such as employee performance appraisal (Coutts & Gruman, 2012), the success of salespeople (Reingen & Kernan, 1993), and satisfaction with a service provider (Magnini et al., 2013; McColl & Truong, 2013; Luoh & Tsauro, 2009), the finding in the present investigation that it also influences estimation of managerial ability is not surprising. All of the above are interpersonal situations, instances where the social ‘power’ attributed to those with a pleasing faces becomes an advantage.

Affective response to the physical features of the person in the photo seemed to play a large role in inference of managerial skill. When the affective tone of the written explanatory judgments of the person reached consensus (favorable in the case of #4 and unfavorable in the case of #3), then inference of managerial ability was particularly pronounced (high or low). The full mechanism of evaluation is uncertain, but respondents seem to develop a holistic impression of the person in the photo, use that to guide their inferences of personality, and then extrapolate from perceived personality whether the person would be a good manager.

There is some support for the above hypothesized sequence. Sundaram and Webster (2000) suggest that social interaction with attractive individuals results in positive affect and this affect influences evaluation. Although interaction in the present study was limited to photos, written comments suggest that this did generate affect. Also, even though respondents in this study were not asked to infer personality traits for the men in the photos, personality is the primary inference resulting from the physical attractiveness stereotype (Eagly et al., 1991). Therefore, inference of personality is hypothesized as an intermediate step in the process leading to estimated managerial ability.

An interesting finding from the main study was a significant gender difference in the evaluation of the #4 stimulus (with women rating the man more generously than men). Although the general trend across all six stimuli was for women to award more favorable ratings than men, it is unclear why only this person (of the six) received a significant gender difference in evaluation. However, it suggests that men and women might “see” differently when judging faces. Supporting this, Flora (2010), states that women tend to be more holistic in their judgment of attractiveness than men. That is, they look at more factors and tend to make an integrated assessment.

Managerial Implications

The physical attractiveness stereotype has profound economic, psychological, and social consequences for individuals, especially the less attractive members of society (Harvard Law Review, 1987). Although the validity of inferences resulting from the physical attractiveness stereotype has been questioned (Feingold, 1992), the vast majority of people believe it is possible to know some or all of a person’s traits from looking at their face (Hassin& Trope, 2000). Therefore, the effects of the stereotype will likely be felt far into the future.

Given that attractiveness information is so prevalent and relied upon in making judgments of others, it makes sense that it would significantly impact estimates of managerial ability, as found in the present study. The real question is whether the attractiveness influence is only short-term (important for the first impression, then subject to attitude correction based on interaction) or whether the influence is more long-term and lasting. Regarding this question, there is some support for the latter possibility.

If inference of managerial ability is similar to an expectation, then the confirmation bias principle may become a factor. Confirmation bias was investigated by Kelley in his famous “cold” versus “warm” experiment (Kelley, 1950). In the study, the expectation of a guest lecturer’s personality was manipulated, alternately describing him in a short biography as either “cold” or “warm”. Two halves of a class of university students received the biography which varied by only one word. Both halves of the class then viewed/participated in the same lecture, but afterward, the two halves rated the lecturer significantly differently on a number of personality traits.

Thus, people with different expectations witnessed the same behavior and reached different conclusions – the confirmation bias (Nickerson, 1998). People tend to select out and pay attention to information that supports their pre-existing beliefs (and discard information that refutes such beliefs). This suggests that the physical attractiveness stereotype, through personality inferences and expectations of future behavior, could impact judgment of a manager beyond a first-impression situation.

A second method by which expectations developed through the physical attractiveness stereotype could impact the future is by changing social interaction with the evaluated person. This was even observed in Kelley’s experiment; 56% of students receiving the “warm” biography participated in class discussion while only 32% of students receiving the “cold” biography participated. Thus, employee assessments of managers arising from the physical attractiveness stereotype could impact managers in two ways, changing social interaction with the manager and also biasing judgment of the manager’s future behavior.

What if the manager is not blessed with good looks? This may be similar to the situation for the person in photo #3 of the present study. Respondent reaction to this photo resulted in largely unfavorable, disparaging comments. Although neatly dressed in tie and suit coat, this person had a slightly downturned smile and a deep nasolabial fold (the smile line running from the edge of the nose to the corner of the mouth). Respondents seemed to find these facial features objectionable. If a manager has a physical feature that might provoke a negative affective response, the proper strategy would be to provide concrete, differentiating, favorable information so that personality assumptions based on the physical attractiveness stereotype are minimized. That is, instead of allowing people to use the stereotype to ‘fill-in’ missing information, provide information (if it is favorable) directly.

Limitations

The present study has several limitations. First, although the physical attractiveness stereotype applies to both men and women (Dion et al., 1972), the effect of the stereotype for inferences of managerial ability for women was not investigated. Thus, it would be premature to generalize the findings of this study to that gender. Second, the full range of physical attractiveness for men was not captured in the set of six photos used in this study, a limitation due to representation. Third, the physical attractiveness stereotype was studied in the general absence of other stereotypes that might affect inference of managerial ability. For example, there are stereotypes related to obesity and the wearing of glasses (Harris et al., 1982) and how these stereotypes might fully interact with the effects of facial appearance was not considered. For all of these reasons, the generalizability of the findings of this study is limited.

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