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Lookism: Recognizing Beauty Bias at Work



EA professionals are often tasked with supporting organizations as they move toward a more equitable workforce. Indeed, the role of the EAP in addressing biases that may negatively impact employees, company culture, and overall organizational health is fundamental to attending to the needs of diverse stakeholders. Additionally, EAP Core Technologies help focus the scope and intent of EA work, including leveraging a consultative role to support leadership in enhancing “the work environment, and improve employee job performance” (EAPA - [Definitions of EAP Core Technologies](#)). In these supportive roles, EA professionals have drawn on research that has long-identified job-related inequities faced by various minority groups in the US, citing the prevalence of minority stress, the impact of discrimination and biases on various dimensions of life (McNutt, 2022a), as well as the important role a diversity, equity, inclusion, and belonging (DEIB) framework provides in giving voice to employees’ unique lived experiences and intersectionality. Further, supporting diverse employees is fundamental to living the values of inclusion and diversity by

illuminating historically overlooked voices (McNutt, 2022b). EA practice is an ideal setting to challenge such sensitive issues by leveraging the support of EA professionals who are skilled in bringing awareness to how biases inform the workplace.

Globally, workplaces continue to be challenged by coming to terms with the ways both explicit and implicit biases shape decision-making processes. At this time, EA professionals may hear the clarion call to innovate upon a DEIB framework that continues to reflect staff diversity, including intersectionality, addressing the ways an individual’s physical presentation impacts many elements of work and life. Drawing from a diversity of fields, including psychology, economics, and even aesthetics, EA practitioners at the vanguard of DEIB work are well-poised to address the unique and problematic premium placed on a historically virtuous signifier: that of beauty.

Lookism: The Science of Beauty Bias and Why it Matters for Work

The preeminent scholar on the economics of beauty, David Hamermesh, defines a premium placed on beauty, or lookism as “...pure discrimination in favor of the good-looking and against the bad looking” (Hamermesh, 2011). This type of favoritism is undergirded by a unique psychological phenomenon, the “halo effect,” a tendency to attribute closely valanced (either good or bad) characteristics with similarly matching characteristics. The halo effect can be typically seen when, for example, when good-looking people are judged to be smarter or more personable than their unattractive counterparts (Laham & Forgas, 2022).

Indeed, lookism is a well-documented phenomenon with economic consequences for those disadvantaged by it: the income disparity between above- and below-average beauty is notably similar to the income gap for race and gender (Chamorro-Premuzic, 2019). Research continues to show that physically attractive job seekers are more successful in moving through hiring processes, make more money (Dossinger et al., 2023; Shapir & Shtudiner, 2022), and are even judged more favorably for ambiguously unethical workplace interactions (Shapir & Shtudiner, 2022). Curiously, the premium placed on beauty in the workplace is not homogenous, that is, beauty is not essential nor even an advantage, for *all* types of work (Dossinger, 2023; Hamermesh, 2011); however, one could perhaps recognize how a preference for the attractive (Dossinger, 2023) has been internalized as a socially accepted social more.

The taboo of talking openly about physical *unattractiveness* further impedes an understanding of how physical facial beauty shapes one’s positionality (Spiegel, 2022). This fact is supported by science which suggests that beauty (physiognomy) is divorced from body, including height and weight designations (Hamermesh, 2011) and is generally, measurably objective, even when mediated by cultural preferences (Chamorro-Premuzic, 2019).

In fact, the beauty bias is so pronounced in hiring practices that some creative HR interventions propose integrating AI to mediate the degree to which managers are influenced by it. One proposal includes using AI to anticipate the likelihood of someone being *regarded* as more effective based on their looks. The details of this consideration would undoubtedly raise compelling, if not problematic, ethical concerns. No doubt, there is a joke somewhere when we consider a hiring practice that involves using a kind of Likert Scale of Attractiveness which could then be correlated to indicators like job performance (Chamorro, Premuzic, 2019). And yet, the mere consideration of using AI to address the impact of the beauty bias in the workplace suggests a need for *some* type of intervention—and a prime opportunity for EA professionals to facilitate one.

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Where Might Lookism Show Up? How EA Professionals Can Support Managers in DEIB Framework Application

Talent Recruitment and Hiring Committees

Research indicates that symmetrical faces are easier for the brain to map, categorize, and *yes*, remember (Dingfelder, 2006). What might it mean then, if after a candidate is interviewed, they are described as “memorable” and another, not so? How much of this assessment might be the brain’s design to recall “clean” easy-to-categorize features—and how many subsequent impressions draw on the associated stereotypes of beauty—like being smart, affable, and honest? Managers on hiring committees may want to consider the degree to which a certain “look” is advocated for. When a manager thinks of an “ideal” candidate, what physically comes to their mind? It might be worth considering this question, both before *and* after candidates are met and considered throughout the interview process—did managers notice if certain personal or professional characteristics from candidates stood out after an interview? And if so, is there an accessible association between a notice of personal or professional attributes and physical presentation?

Performance Evaluations

Managers who provide employees with performance evaluations are similarly tasked with asking themselves serious questions around the role looks play in evaluating an employee. Whether feedback is quantified, qualified, or a mix of the two, a critical awareness can precipitate conversations about impressions of an employee’s past, current, and prospective capacity to do a job well.

Management Consults

EA professionals are uniquely suited in attending to lookism at various levels of workplace processes. Ideally, conversations about how looks impact employees and the work environment are initiated early and often. This includes talking openly about how lookism impacts candidate interview processes, hiring decisions, and promotions, and addressing them before or in tandem with larger-scale interventions like management consults. EA professionals can support managers in navigating these uncomfortable conversations by addressing how leadership assigns or imagines work expectations for themselves and others and building and/or repairing team trust when beauty bias has been experienced.

Key Takeaways

- Ignoring the reality of lookism is to deny the lived experiences both of those who benefit from and are disadvantaged by the beauty premium.
- EA professionals are uniquely positioned to educate about and help address the impact of lookism in the workplace by intervening at the following levels:
 1. Talent Recruitment: inviting conversation from ancillary HR specialists in a personal and professional exploration of how lookism shows up in hiring practices
 2. Performance Evaluations: providing for managers work-appropriate language to develop insight-building about how they can more *holistically* assess perceptions of performance
 3. Management Consultations: supporting managers in bringing attention to how lookism presents at many levels of workplace environment
- Given the social taboo of speaking honestly about physical attraction (Spiegel, 2022), how might EA professionals begin to unpack their *own* awareness of how lookism shows up at work? For this, self-evaluation and personal insight are essential: when we hold the mirror up to our own judgments, we can see better how these biases show up in an EA context.

Holding the Mirror Up: Questions to Facilitate Conversation

- Consider how another’s attractiveness and your own subjective/objective perception informs your perception of them. *Are there opportunities for self-reflection about how others’ looks inform your personal opinions?*
- *How can we speak honestly about the role of physical attraction while staying mindful of how acknowledgement of such could be interpreted as sexually charged language?*
- Consider what associations or conclusions you make based on someone’s appearance. *How do you acknowledge (or not) beauty, and give credence to the legitimate science of attraction? How might your own looks-based values and associations show up in team building and collaboration? Might there be opportunities to engage with colleagues about the role looks play in hiring practices?*

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