

Ugly? You May Have a Case

DANIEL S. HAMERMESH

Being good-looking is useful in so many ways.

In addition to whatever personal pleasure it gives you, being attractive also helps you earn more money, find a higher-earning spouse (and one who looks better, too!) and get better deals on mortgages. Each of these facts has been demonstrated over the past twenty years by many economists and other researchers. The effects are not small: one study showed that an American worker who was among the bottom one-seventh in looks, as assessed by randomly chosen observers, earned 10 to 15 percent less per year than a similar worker whose looks were assessed in the top one-third—a lifetime difference, in a typical case, of about \$230,000.

Beauty is as much an issue for men as for women. While extensive research shows that women's looks have bigger impacts in the market for mates, another large group of studies demonstrates that men's looks have bigger impacts on the job.

Why this disparate treatment of looks in so many areas of life? It's a matter of simple prejudice. Most of us, regardless of our professed attitudes, prefer as customers to buy from better-looking salespeople, as jurors to listen to better-looking attorneys, as voters to be led by better-looking politicians, as students to learn from better-looking professors. This is not a matter of evil employers' refusing to hire the ugly: in our roles as workers, customers and potential lovers we are all responsible for these effects.

How could we remedy this injustice? With all the gains to being good-looking, you would think that more people would get plastic surgery or makeovers to improve their looks. Many of us do all those things, but as studies have shown, such refinements make only small differences in our beauty. All that spending may make us feel better, but it doesn't help us much in getting a better job or a more desirable mate.

Daniel S. Hamermesh is a professor of psychology at the University of Texas at Austin and the author of *Beauty Pays* (2011). This essay originally appeared on August 27, 2011, in *the New York Times*.

A more radical solution may be needed: why not offer legal protections to the ugly, as we do with racial, ethnic and religious minorities, women and handicapped individuals?

We actually already do offer such protections in a few places, including in some jurisdictions in California, and in the District of Columbia, where discriminatory treatment based on looks in hiring, promotions, housing and other areas is prohibited. Ugliness could be protected generally in the United States by small extensions of the Americans With Disabilities Act. Ugly people could be allowed to seek help from the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission and other agencies in overcoming the effects of discrimination. We could even have affirmative-action programs for the ugly.

The mechanics of legislating this kind of protection are not as difficult as you might think. You might argue that people can't be classified by their looks—that beauty is in the eye of the beholder. That aphorism is correct in one sense: if asked who is the most beautiful person in a group of beautiful people, you and I might well have different answers. But when it comes to differentiating classes of attractiveness, we all view beauty similarly: someone whom you consider good-looking will be viewed similarly by most others; someone you consider ugly will be viewed as ugly by most others. In one study, more than half of a group of people were assessed identically by each of two observers using a five-point scale, and very few assessments differed by more than one point.

For purposes of administering a law, we surely could agree on who is truly ugly, perhaps the worst-looking 1 or 2 percent of the population. The difficulties in classification are little greater than those faced in deciding who qualifies for protection on grounds of disabilities that limit the activities of daily life, as shown by conflicting decisions in numerous legal cases involving obesity.

There are other possible objections. "Ugliness" is not a personal trait that many people choose to embrace; those whom we classify as protected might not be willing to admit that they are ugly. But with the chance of obtaining extra pay and promotions amounting to \$230,000 in lost lifetime earnings, there's a large enough incentive to do so. Bringing anti-discrimination lawsuits is also costly, and few potential plaintiffs could afford to do so. But many attorneys would be willing to organize classes of plaintiffs to overcome these costs, just as they now do in racial-discrimination and other lawsuits.

Economic arguments for protecting the ugly are as strong as those for protecting some groups currently covered by legislation. So why not go ahead and expand protection to the looks-challenged? There's one legitimate concern. With increasingly tight limits on government resources, expanding rights to yet another protected group would reduce protection for groups that have commanded our legislative and other attention for over fifty years.

We face a trade-off: ignore a deserving group of citizens, or help them but limit help available for other groups. Even though I myself have demonstrated the disadvantages of ugliness in twenty years of research, I nonetheless would hate to see anything that might reduce assistance to groups now aided by protective legislation.

You might reasonably disagree and argue for protecting all deserving groups. Either way, you shouldn't be surprised to see the United States heading toward this new legal frontier.