When it comes to earning money, personality may be more important than looks

Satoshi Kanazawaa

Mary C. Still

Video Abstract

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Abstract

Economists have long acknowledged that physical attractiveness affects wages. Highly attractive men and women generally earn more than ordinary people doing comparable work. But it's not clear _why_ this linkage exists. To answer this question, two scientists recently reported on a study designed to uncover the root cause of this so-called beauty premium. Their results imply that physically attractive people make more money _not_ because they're beautiful, but rather because they're healthier, more intelligent, and have more pleasant personalities. Their study tracked the careers and physical attractiveness of over 15,000 people for more than ten years. Participants were interviewed starting around age 16 and again at ages 17, 22, and 29. In each interview, they shared their gross personal earnings over the previous year and described their current occupation and health status. They also completed personality assessments and IQ tests. After each interview, their physical attractiveness was rated on a five-point scale. The team used the data to test three leading hypotheses for why the beauty premium exists: employer discrimination against physically unattractive employees, the natural tendency of physically attractive employees to pursue jobs in which physical attractiveness is rewarded, and the possibility that more physically attractive workers may genuinely differ from their less attractive counterparts in ways that affect productivity. They found that the final hypothesis was the primary reason for the wage gap. Apparently, very physically attractive people aren't excelling at work due to their looks, but rather because they more often possess qualities like good health, high intelligence, and extraversion. This conclusion was further supported by a rather unexpected finding: Individuals rated as very unattractive actually earned more than those rated unattractive, average looking, or even attractive. The reason again came down to individual differences. Very unattractive individuals attained higher levels of education and had higher IQ scores than the other groups. In essence, these results suggest that it's not looks influencing pay grade, per se. Certain desirable qualities may just be more pronounced in select groups of people, who also happen to be either very attractive _or_ very unattractive.