

Chapter 5

Genderized Workplace Lookism in the U.S. and Abroad: Implications for Organization and Career Development Professionals

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ABSTRACT

Lookism is preferential treatment of those considered to be attractive and discrimination against those deemed less physically desirable. Value is attached to certain physical characteristics such as skin tone, height, weight, facial features, and hair color/textures. Two of the phenomena that exist under the umbrella of lookism are colorism and weightism, which are both genderized phenomenon that create social and workplace inequities. There are studies that explore physical appearance discrimination external to and within workplaces in the United States; however, there is little research on the impact of these prejudices on women abroad. Since today's global workforce is composed of women from various countries and cultural backgrounds, and their cultural values impact their career aspirations and career opportunities, organizational and career development professionals must understand the implications of both U.S. and international lookism and utilize strategies to address and prevent the related issues.

INTRODUCTION

The benefits of attractiveness are well-documented and common in many cultures. Beauty grants social capital and unearned privilege to those with desired physical features, and these advantages are perpetuated in various social institutions, including families, schools, media, and workplaces. Systems of privilege and discrimination result when people with certain physical features are given preferential

treatment, particularly in the workplace. There is a growing body of research on workplace physical appearance discrimination, also termed *lookism*, in the United States, prompting the creation of organizational policies, national legislation, and preventive outreach regarding equitable recruitment, hiring, and retention practices.

Global nations, on the other hand, have not been as pioneering in research efforts or legislative solutions to address lookism. The lack of research,

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strategies, policies, and outreach hinders the creation of means to address lookism in workplaces abroad. Furthermore, lookism is a genderized phenomenon, so women are especially negatively impacted. Women's career development can be stifled, which may have an adverse effect on their economic security. Organization and career development professionals around the world have an opportunity and responsibility to address this emerging workforce diversity issue.

This chapter will present literature on gendered lookism and its derivatives, colorism and weightism, as workplace diversity issues in the United States and abroad. The objectives of this chapter are to increase the diversity awareness of organizational and career development professionals regarding genderized workplace lookism and to provide suggestions for working with women who have experienced or are at risk of this form of discrimination.

BACKGROUND

Lookism

Lookism, often referred to as physical appearance discrimination, is preferential treatment of those considered to be attractive and discrimination against those deemed less physically desirable. Cultures attach stigmas to certain immutable features, both positive and negative. These features include skin tone, weight, height, eye color, hair texture, etc. Physical appearance stigmatizing, judging others based on their features, results and involves the development and maintenance of stereotypes, which is then followed by unequal treatment. Attractive people are viewed and treated favorably, and less attractive people are perceived negatively and deemed undesirable.

In the workforce and workplace, physically attractive people are advantaged in many ways and in various contexts. In terms of employment decision-making, the more attractive a person is

perceived to be, the more benefits they receive. Gumin (2012) posited that those who fit the societal description of attractiveness are more likely to be hired and have a greater probability of retention and advancement in their careers. Many times, attractive people are more likely to be hired with a higher salary (Mahajan, 2007). A study by Johnson, Podratz, Dipboye, & Gibbons (2010) found that being attractive is beneficial for both men and women when applying for most jobs, particularly in terms of high ratings of employment suitability. In their study to examine perceived physical attractiveness and student evaluations, Riniolo, Johnson, & Sherman (2006) found that professors perceived as attractive received higher student evaluations than did those considered unattractive. This was true across departments, gender, and four separate universities.

Sometimes, however, lookism works against physically attractive people because good looks may be linked to poor qualities. For example, the idea of a dumb blonde is usually related to a specific attractive female with low intelligence and incompetence (Davis, 2007). The stigma attached to these attractive features has the opposite effect. This negative perception of attractiveness disadvantages good-looking people and can perpetuate workplace discrimination.

Research on lookism is important because appearance has implications, both positive and negative, for success and failure in the various stages of employment. Appearance can impact the recruitment of a job applicant via selection processes and the retention and promotion of an employee. Sometimes the perceived achievement of an applicant or employee within a job is determined by her physical appearance (Little & Roberts, 2012). The benefit of an attractive employee to an organization is also a consideration because as the employee represents the company, its bottom line is impacted. Appearance affects an employer's judgment about the qualifications of an employee, and it influences a customer's perception of the company and its products/services.

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