

Physical attractiveness – who believes it is a ticket to success?

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According to previous research, physical appearance is an important asset that contributes to socio-economic success. However, the consequences associated with physical appearance are often considered gendered. By focusing on the two aspects relevant to physical attractiveness and social stratification, gender and socio-economic status (SES), the article examines whether or not women and men in certain socio-economic positions consider physical attractiveness an important asset in everyday life. We use data from a nationally representative survey. Our analyses suggest that women tend to believe that physical attractiveness contributes to success in life more often than men. Furthermore, we find that the representatives of the middle class, in particular, recognise the significance of physical attractiveness. This applies to both women and men. The results suggest that appearance-related beliefs reflect, first and foremost, the internal battle of middle status positions as well as the willingness to separate oneself from a lower status group.

Keywords: Physical appearance, social stratification, socio-economic status (SES), gender, beliefs

Introduction

The contribution of physical appearance to social inequalities has been long recognised in social stratification research. However, stratification has traditionally been explained by other factors, and physical attractiveness has only recently become an area of focus in this field of research. Sociologists have investigated the social (Mulford et al. 1998), socio-economic (e.g., Härkönen 2007; Härkönen et al. 2011; Glass et al. 2010; Sala et al. 2013), as well as sociobiological (e.g., Jæger 2011; McClintock 2014) consequences of physical appearance, and have shown that physical appearance does indeed make a difference.

Based on these empirical findings, sociologists have increasingly begun to consider physical appearance as a form of capital (Anderson et al. 2010; Hakim 2010; Holla & Kuipers 2015). Given this, physical appearance – as a combination of one's facial features, body size and shape, as well as personal grooming style – can be understood as a type of social resource that varies across individuals and can also be converted into other types of resources. The uneven distribution of this type of capital makes it a source of social stratification, as those who have this resource may be expected to gain social and economic rewards from it (Anderson et al. 2010).

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Although the relationship between physical appearance and social stratification has gained increasing attention in the field of sociology, less attention has been paid to the questions addressed in this paper: who actually perceives that physical appearance contributes to a person's success in life? We argue that this is an important question for two reasons. Firstly, general beliefs reflect the prevailing ideology in a particular society (Hunt 1996). In our case, the analysis of appearance-related beliefs contributes to an understanding of the relationship between meritocracy and physical appearance. As noted by Holla and Kuipers (2015, p. 291), one way to understand the asset logic of physical appearance is to identify what they refer to as aesthetic capital, as a form of human capital. According to general beliefs, education and other traditional forms of human capital develop and accumulate following the meritocratic logic: investing more on the development of positive skills and traits leads to better socioeconomic outcomes. However, physical appearance can only partly be developed through investments. In Finland, the belief in education as a vehicle for social mobility has traditionally been strong (Silvennoinen & Klas 1996), suggesting the importance of achievement and the equality of opportunity as a generally shared value in socioeconomic attainment. Much less is known about the importance of ascribed characteristics. The classical theories expect that the importance of ascription should reduce when the role of achievement becomes stronger (Blau & Duncan 1967); yet the above-mentioned findings suggest that the ascribed characteristics related to physical appearance may still play an especially important role in social and economic attainment. In this sense, belief in the meaning of attractive physical appearance in achieving success reflects an assumption about how the current 'system' operates.

Secondly, beliefs are formulated in interaction with one's personal experiences and group memberships (Hunt 1996;

Kallio & Niemelä 2014), and are linked with behaviour through attitudes (Ajzen 1991). Thus, an examination of beliefs has the potential to help us understand why, and among whom, physical appearance tends to accumulate with other types of capital (cf. Anderson et al. 2010).

With regards to group memberships, we argue that two types of group memberships, in particular, form a relevant basis for physical appearance-related beliefs: socio-economic status (SES) and gender, and the interaction between these two memberships. Drawing from the Bourdieuan approach, we argue that belief in the power of physical appearance varies across different classes and genders and thus, maintains certain cultural hierarchies between different social classes (cf. Holla & Kuipers 2015). This holds true regardless of whether we consider appearance-related beliefs to be based on one's own real life experiences or a pure class-based cultural understanding of the meaning of physical appearance.

We start by discussing the importance of physical appearance from a gender perspective and then bring SES into discussion. After that, we present our gender-specific models and finally, conclude by discussing our findings. Our data is derived from a nationally representative survey.

Background and hypothesis

Gender, physical appearance and social stratification

The primacy of women's physical attractiveness in contemporary Western culture has been widely discussed in academic literature. It is generally accepted that physical attractiveness plays a more important role in the everyday lives of women than men: women are considered to be more interested in their appearance and experience more pressure to attend to their looks. Although societal changes such as the rise of consumer culture and women's participation in work life are believed to have changed the traditional gender dynamic of physical attractiveness (e.g., Gill et al. 2005; Hakim 2010), gender differences still exist. For example, studies show that women are more concerned about their looks and are more involved in appearance-related consumption practices than men (e.g., Wilska 2002; Grogan 2008; Berg & Teigen 2009; Sarpila & Räsänen 2011). In addition, a recent empirical study indicates that gender differences in appearance-related attitudes and behaviours appear to be stable (Sarpila 2013).

For many feminist scholars, including Wolf (1991) and Bordo (1993), women's own interest in their physical appearance, as an attitudinal stance and a form of body modification behaviour, is a consequence of the narrow definition of femininity and the unrealistic body ideals that women are expected to meet. Other scholars have emphasised the active agency of women in creating their appearance (Davis 2003).

Drawing from Pierre Bourdieu's classic work, Hakim (2010) considers that patriarchy has taken away women's possibility to benefit from what she refers to as their 'erotic capital' to succeed in different spheres of life. Hakim defines erotic capital as a combination of aesthetic, visual, physi-

cal, social and sexual attractiveness. She asserts that erotic capital can produce the same advantages as social, cultural and economic capital and should be treated as an independent form of capital. Gender is key to the power offered by erotic capital: women generally have more of it than men because they have traditionally made more effort to achieve and develop it, particularly through appearance-related consumption practices. Furthermore, Hakim states that it is in men's interest to undermine the meaning of physical attractiveness in everyday life because by doing so, they can prevent women from benefitting from it:

"As women generally have more erotic capital than men, so men deny it exists or has value, and have taken steps to ensure women cannot legitimately exploit their relative advantage." (Hakim 2010, p. 499).

In large-scale studies examining physical appearance and gender from a social stratification perspective, one of the most commonly used measures of physical appearance is the body mass index (BMI). Various empirical studies suggest that weight-related stigmas are indeed more prevalent among women than men (e.g., Tiggemann & Rothblum 1988; Falkner et al. 1999; Andreyeva et al. 2008). Furthermore, several studies on BMI and occupational attainment indicate that women with a high BMI face several labour market disadvantages, including a higher risk of being unemployed (e.g., Sarlio-Lähteenkorva & Lahelma 1999; Cawley & Danziger 2005; Härkönen 2007; Morris 2007), receiving lower wages (e.g., Averett & Korenman 1999; Pagan & Davila 1997; Cawley 2004; Brunello & d'Hombres 2007), and having a lower socio-economic status throughout their life course (Jæger 2011). What this might mean is that, as women in general might have more experience in how physical appearance is related to life success and this, might be reflected in their attitudes.

What this suggests is that men and women, in general, have different beliefs about the importance of physical appearance in achievement. This could also be assumed on the basis of gender differences in appearance-related experiences as well as on the basis of consequences that previous stratification studies have shown physical appearance to hold.

The interaction of gender and social class in physical appearance -based stratification

As in previous research on gender, BMI and socio-economic attainment research suggests that it is reasonable to expect physical appearance to reinforce other social inequalities, based on gender and class interaction, in particular (see Rhode 2010). Theoretically, Bourdieu's (1984) original concept of body capital can be considered useful here as it encompasses the role of gender as well as social class. According to Bourdieu's (1984) influential theory of taste, the body operates as a bearer of class-based differences in taste. Thus, the value of a body is based on its capacity to reproduce and express good taste. For Bourdieu, body capital is primarily socially (not biologically) defined because mem-

bers of different social classes assign different meanings to it:

“The interest the different classes have in self-presentation, the attention they devote to it, their awareness of the profits it gives and the investment of time, effort, sacrifice and care which they actually put into it are proportionate to chances of material or symbolic profit they can reasonably expect from it” (Bourdieu 1984, p. 202).

Bourdieu proposes that the relationship of members of the working class to their own bodies is generally more instrumental, whereas the middle and upper classes are generally more interested in how the body looks.

According to Bourdieu, women, particularly those from the middle and higher classes, have learned to utilise their body capital and know what it means to be beautiful (Bourdieu 1984). The difference between upper-class and middle-class women is that the latter feel less satisfied with their physical appearance and can never feel comfortable in their bodies. Bourdieu argues that bodily uneasiness and an awareness of the meaning of physical attractiveness among the middle class leads to obsessive attitudes (status panic) towards attending to one’s appearance through consumption-related practices (Bourdieu 1984, p. 200-220). In other words, the body of an upper-class member effortlessly embodies his/her taste and status, whereas a member of the middle-class sees the body as an investment which can be turned into a social and economic profit. This type of investment attitude labels the whole way of thinking of the middle class. In this view, being a middle-class member is a constant struggle to achieve something, whereas being a dominant class member is more or less about maintaining one’s social status. This also makes middle class members the main customers of appearance-related products and services (Featherstone 1987, p. 65). Thus, the representatives of the middle class are also more likely to think that good looks can help one to get ahead.

The middle-class argument seems relevant to the late modern work-life context as well. The expansion of the service sector has generated a wide range of middle-class occupations where the importance of physical appearance and self-presentation is emphasised (e.g., Bourdieu 1984; Härkönen et al. 2011; Sarpila 2013). As Smith Maguire (2008) puts it:

“The post-industrial middle class is thus bound up with the growth of consumer service industries, which has created new and expanded existing occupations at the both ends of the service class, from the professional/managerial positions to the clerical and sales positions in industries such as advertising, fashion, media and health.” (Smith Maguire 2008, p. 53)

The so called ‘aesthetic labour’ is considered to label an increasing amount poorly paid part-time jobs as well. In retail, in particular where looking good and sounding right are important characteristics for salespersons ‘aesthetic labour’ has become markedly embodied in female service work (Witz et al. 2003; Williams & Connell 2010). Thus,

women especially, might have more personal experience than men with the importance of physical appearance in the work context, which is further reflected in their beliefs.

Furthermore, physical appearance in low-skilled service work is often to some extent defined by the employer. Uniforms are common, conformism preferred, and thus, possibilities for the expression of personal style are usually quite limited. These types of requirements, however, only apply to a limited number of working-class jobs in certain sectors including retail and hospitality, whereas in middle-class occupations, requirements for physical appearance are clearly more often present. Good looks may appear as a marketable skill within middle-class occupations, in particular, (cf. Smith Maguire 2008), and employers might be willing to pay for it. In other words, physical attractiveness thus provides a competitive advantage among middle-class occupations in which the formal education requirements are lower than in higher-end occupations. In Finland, highly skilled professionals in particular, have traditionally legitimated their own high social standing through a strong belief in education: the higher the occupational status the higher the belief in education as a means of social mobility has been (Silvennoinen & Klas 1996). Consequently, their ideal society might be an education society rather than an appearance society, in contrast to that of the middle-class.

On the basis of the discussion above, we propose the following hypothesis:

H1: Those in the middle SES, especially women, believe that physical attractiveness helps one achieve success

Socio-economic status and appearance-related beliefs can also be approached, not only from the perspective of one’s own SES, but by looking at the relationship between one’s own and one’s spouse’s SES. There is a long research tradition in sociology and socio-biology, in particular, that has looked at the dynamics of physical attractiveness and spouse selection. Although Finnish women have a high labour force participation rate, and the social stratification of coupled women may therefore be largely independent of their spouse’s social standing (cf. Sørensen 1994; Jaumotte 2003; Beller 2009), the possible effect of a spouse’s SES cannot be totally neglected. It is possible that, rather than the women’s SES per se, the relationship between women’s own SES and their spouse’s SES is the most significant as beliefs about the importance of attractiveness to achievement are considered.

As the first hypothesis suggests that the belief associated with one’s own orientation towards life, in achievements and standing in the labour market, our second hypothesis is formulated on the basis of the idea of exchange in relationships. Discussions of physical attractiveness and status often raise the subject of the ‘trophy wife’. Influential arguments about this phenomenon suggest that in spouse selection, physical attractiveness is exchanged for socio-economic status. This process is gendered: physical attractiveness is an exchangeable asset for women, while resource acquisition skills, i.e., social status, is an asset for men (e.g., Elder 1969; Buss 1989; Buss & Shackelford 2008). Thus, SES can be viewed as one’s own achievement, i.e., one’s own SES is high, or

as something achieved through marriage, i.e., one's spouse's SES is higher than one's own. Although we do not directly analyse the exchange mechanism in this paper, it can be argued that if the exchange theory is right, women who have coupled with a man whose SES is higher than their own SES have 'managed' to do so because of how they look. Furthermore, this should be reflected in their attitudes i.e. they should be more likely to perceive physical attractiveness as important in everyday life. Therefore, we propose a second hypothesis:

H2: Women, particularly those whose SES is lower than their spouse's, believe that physical attractiveness helps one achieve success

However, recent empirical studies question the 'trophy wife' and 'trophy husband' hypotheses, the latter of which refers to situations in which a woman exchanges her status for a man's attractiveness. In Jæger's (2011) study, the physical attractiveness of neither men nor women was found to be associated with their spouse's socioeconomic success. Another recent study by McClintock (2014) suggests that when matching is taken into account, almost no evidence of beauty-status exchange can be found. A spouse's SES may be associated with the type of appearance-related attitude studied regardless of a woman's own SES. This is actually more likely in contemporary societies, in which individuals tend to partner with those similar to themselves (e.g., Blossfeld & Timm 2003; Blossfeld 2009; Erola et al. 2012). On the other hand, the following hypothesis comes close to Bourdieu's original idea where a woman's SES was measured by using her spouse's SES. Today's updated interpretation would be that the middle-class status and lifestyle concerns, and furthermore, cultural understanding of the meaning of physical appearance (see discussion concerning H1) can be mediated either by one's own or their spouse's SES. Moreover, when taking into account the gendered theoretical discussion on appearance-related attitudes, we propose a third hypothesis:

H3: Regardless of their own SES, women, especially those whose spouses have a middle SES, believe that physical attractiveness helps one achieve success

Finally, it is possible that gender differences do not exist. The gender-specific hypotheses are questionable, especially considering the characteristics of contemporary consumer culture in which the importance of the body and physical appearance has already been widely recognised. The body and the self are inextricably intertwined in consumer culture: regardless of gender, people are not merely encouraged, but are expected to, constantly evaluate, modify and control their physical appearance. By doing so, they express their identity (Jagger 2000; Baumann 2007; Featherstone 2007). Because this paper examines attitudes rather than structural outcomes, it is possible that no clear gender differences or interactions between gender and SES will be found. In the next section, the data and variables are presented, then, the hypotheses are tested.

Data and methods

The survey data utilised in this article was collected by researchers at the University of Turku in the spring of 2011. The final sample covers 908 Finnish-speaking Finns, aged 15 to 64-years-old with a response rate of 46 per cent. As expected, the final data were, to some extent, biased: men and those under age 40 were slightly under-represented (1–2 percentage points compared to the population); women and those over 60 years old were, similarly, over-represented in the data (1–3 percentage points compared to the population). To correct the bias, the data were weighted to correspond to the true age and gender distribution. All analyses presented below are conducted using these sampling weights.

Because our hypotheses consider the influence of an individual's middle-class position, either through one's own position or through partnering, only those aged 30–65 and those currently in a relationship were included in the reported models. We assumed that this group consists of those who have already entered the labour market and thus have an occupational status of their own but who have not yet exited the labour market or have only recently begun to draw pensions. Our final data consisted of 512 cases.

Our main dependent variable concerns respondents' beliefs about the importance of attractiveness for achievement. The respondents were asked to evaluate the claim 'I believe that physical attractiveness contributes to success in life' on a scale from 1 ('strongly disagree') to 5 ('strongly agree'). The variable was standardised so that the scale mean (3.00) was centred to zero and a change of one unit was equivalent to a change in agreement with one standard error (*z*-standardisation).

The explanatory variables considered include gender, one's own and their spouse's ISEI (International Socio-Economic Index) status, a respondent's body mass index (BMI) and age. We used continuous ISEI data rather than a categorical social status measurement because of this study's assumptions about the importance of the middle-class position. Categorical measures (such as EG class classification) are also often theoretically truly nominal and, therefore, do not have an easily defined middle group (Prandy 2000; see also Goldthorpe 2007).

The ISEI is constructed by indexing occupations according to earnings and education (Ganzeboom et al. 1992). In our data, the index ranges from 16 to 88, with a typical bias towards the lower end. Respondents' own ISEI were categorised into three quantiles (low, middle and high), and the same cut-offs were applied to categorise the ISEI of the spouses. It is not intended that those in the low group would all belong to the traditional working class or that the high group would consist of some kind of an elite or upper-class. A more careful examination of our measure reveals, however, that the lower ISEI group is mostly comprised of manual workers and low skilled service employees such as assistant nurses and cleaners. The middle ISEI group includes such occupations as nurses, sales workers, police officers, kindergarten teachers (who in Finland have a bachelor's degree). Occupations such as doctors, teachers and different levels

Table 1

Agreement with the statement, "I believe that physical attractiveness contributes to success in life" by gender for each explanatory and control variable. The distributions of the explanatory factors and their mean deviations from the grand mean. All numbers weighted.

		Women		Men		Total	
		Mean	SE	Mean	SE	Mean	SE
<i>Own ISEI</i>							
Low	(n=190)	-0.06	(0.11)	-0.37	(0.11)	-0.22	(0.08)
Middle	(n=137)	0.33	(0.12)	0.10	(0.11)	0.22	(0.08)
High	(n=199)	0.12	(0.09)	-0.07	(0.12)	0.02	(0.08)
Total	(n=526)	0.12	(0.06)	-0.14	(0.07)	-0.01	(0.05)
<i>Partner ISEI</i>							
Low	(n=184)	-0.01	(0.11)	-0.13	(0.11)	-0.06	(0.08)
Middle	(n=129)	0.13	(0.14)	-0.08	(0.11)	0.00	(0.09)
High	(n=213)	0.25	(0.09)	-0.20	(0.12)	0.02	(0.08)
Total	(n=526)	0.12	(0.06)	-0.14	(0.07)	-0.01	(0.05)
<i>Age</i>							
30-39	(n=126)	0.34	(0.12)	-0.01	(0.13)	0.18	(0.09)
40-49	(n=141)	-0.06	(0.12)	-0.13	(0.12)	-0.10	(0.08)
50-59	(n=156)	-0.04	(0.13)	-0.26	(0.12)	-0.16	(0.09)
60-65	(n=98)	0.35	(0.13)	-0.10	(0.18)	0.11	(0.12)
Total	(n=521)	0.12	(0.06)	-0.14	(0.07)	-0.01	(0.05)
<i>BMI</i>							
<=25	(n=239)	0.08	(0.08)	0.03	(0.12)	0.06	(0.06)
>25 & <30	(n=185)	0.22	(0.14)	-0.18	(0.10)	-0.04	(0.08)
>=30	(n=102)	0.12	(0.18)	-0.34	(0.13)	-0.14	(0.11)
Total	(n=526)	0.12	(0.06)	-0.14	(0.07)	-0.01	(0.05)

of managers form the high ISEI group. The most problematic occupational group for our analyses are the extremely heterogeneous group of entrepreneurs. However, excluding them from our analysis did not change the results, and middle group can be considered the best place for them when taking heterogeneity into account. Thus, although not unproblematic, the applied ISEI classification forms three somewhat hierarchically organized groups and offers a tool for analysing physical appearance related to belief from the point of view of one's own standing.

A similar method was used to categorise BMI into three groups: less than 25, 25-30 and more than 30. These three categories were based on the World Health Organization's (2012) BMI classification; respondents in the lowest category are considered to have a normal weight, those in the middle group are considered overweight, and those in the highest BMI group are considered obese (WHO, 2012). In accordance with previous studies, we use BMI as a proxy measure of a respondent's own physical appearance (e.g., Jæger 2011) that is especially relevant to women. As beliefs are formulated in interaction with one's personal experiences and group memberships (Hunt 1996), it is important to include a measure of the respondent's own physical appearance into the analysis.

Age was included as a control variable. Taking age into account should improve the comparability of both ISEI status and BMI. Because the association between age and beliefs about the importance of physical attractiveness was not linear, we divided age into four groups.

Results

The general mean of the dependent variable in our data, even without standardisation, is precisely 3.0. This shows that Finns seem to be rather undecided about the importance of physical appearance for succeeding in life.

Table 1 presents the descriptive statistics by gender. The results show that women tend to be more in agreement with the statement, regardless of their subgroup. The youngest and the oldest women, women whose spouses had middle and high SESs and those women who were themselves to some extent overweight agreed the most with the statement. Low status men, obese men, men in their fifties or men with high status spouses disagreed with the statement the most. Women's opinions also vary more than men's across the categories of the variables, with the notable exception of men's BMI. In this case, there appears to be a linear association between weight and disagreement.

Table 2

Agreement with the statement, "I believe that physical attractiveness contributes to success in life". Multivariate OLS regression models for men and women.

	Women			Men		
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
<i>Own ISEI (ref. Low)</i>	-	-	-	-	-	-
Middle	0.33+ (0.17)	0.30+ (0.17)	0.39* (0.18)	0.46** (0.16)	0.47** (0.16)	0.45** (0.16)
High	0.16 (0.15)	0.08 (0.16)	0.30+ (0.17)	0.22 (0.16)	0.30+ (0.17)	0.16 (0.17)
<i>Age (ref. 30-39)</i>	-	-	-	-	-	-
40-49	-0.36* (0.16)	-0.36* (0.17)	-0.34* (0.17)	-0.16 (0.18)	-0.15 (0.18)	-0.17 (0.17)
50-59	-0.31+ (0.18)	-0.30+ (0.18)	-0.30+ (0.18)	-0.25 (0.18)	-0.24 (0.18)	-0.25 (0.17)
60-65	0.04 (0.18)	0.02 (0.18)	0.04 (0.18)	-0.01 (0.22)	-0.03 (0.22)	-0.05 (0.21)
<i>BMI (ref. <25)</i>	-	-	-	-	-	-
25-30	0.07 (0.15)	0.08 (0.15)	0.09 (0.15)	-0.21 (0.16)	-0.21 (0.15)	-0.20 (0.15)
>30	0.01 (0.20)	0.04 (0.20)	0.05 (0.20)	-0.35* (0.18)	-0.38* (0.18)	-0.36* (0.17)
<i>Partner ISEI (ref. Low)</i>		-			-	
Middle		0.12 (0.18)			-0.04 (0.16)	
High		0.24+ (0.15)			-0.24 (0.17)	
<i>Partner ISEI compared to own (ref. same)</i>						
Partner higher ISEI			-0.03 (0.18)			-0.50** (0.19)
Partner lower ISEI			-0.35+ (0.18)			-0.22 (0.18)
Constant	0.13 (0.18)	0.04 (0.19)	0.11 (0.18)	-0.04 (0.19)	0.04 (0.20)	0.12 (0.18)
N	271	271	271	241	241	241
R2	0.0550	0.0652	0.0710	0.0579	0.0673	0.0913

Table 2 presents the results of the multivariate OLS regressions performed on the same variables. Because the descriptive results in Table 1 suggested substantial gender differences, men and women were modelled separately. The first model (women) suggests that there is a socioeconomic gradient in the belief in the importance of physical attractiveness for success. As Bourdieu's theory proposes, the positive effect appears to be limited to the middle-class. However, contrary to expectations, the socioeconomic gradient is similar for men, and even slightly stronger than that, found for women. Furthermore, there are no significant differences according to BMI among women, whereas the linear relationship between weight and disagreement observed in the univariate analysis was again found among men, even after socioeconomic status and age were taken into account.

In the second multivariate models, the socio-economic status of the spouse was added. The results demonstrated that women experienced a weak positive effect with regards

to their spouse's SES. Interestingly, men with spouses of a high socio-economic status yielded exactly the opposite negative (although statistically insignificant) effect, indicating that women and men in similar structural positions hold opposite beliefs. Thus, the results weakly support our third hypothesis that women's status attainment through partnership is positively associated with their opinions about the importance of physical attractiveness for success.

To test the hypothesis proposing the association between the 'trophy wife' theory and the importance of physical attractiveness, four parameters for the interaction between one's own self and a spouse's ISEI should be added to the model. However, the small sample size did not allow this. Therefore, we recoded simple indicators of whether the spouse's ISEI was either more than one standard deviation higher or one standard deviation lower than the respondent's. In the third model, replacing the estimates for spouse's ISEI with the two dummy indicators yielded inter-

esting cross-over effects. Women whose partners' ISEIs were significantly lower than their own tend to disagree with the statement more, and men whose spouses have higher ISEIs, tend to have a similar opinion. In other words, for couples in which the women had significantly higher statuses than men ('trophy husband' couples), each partner tends to believe that attractiveness is irrelevant to success. Auxiliary, unreported analyses show that this result is largely unaffected by controlling for BMI, which in this study indicates attractiveness.

In addition to the models whose results are reported in Table 2, additional parameterisations and interactions were tested. None of these yielded statistically significant associations with the dependent variable. For example, there is no interaction between either status variable and BMI or age. We also tested several other possibly important explanatory factors but found no significant results. These included education, unemployment, income and family structure. Finally, we also tested alternative modelling strategy, Heckman selection models, in order to take into account the possible bias through the selection of partnerships. This did not change the results.

Discussion

According to general understanding, beliefs reflect the prevailing ideology in a particular society. As well as linked with one's personal experiences, group memberships, can predict one's behaviour in the issues related to the belief (Hunt 1996; Ajzen 1991).

Firstly, with regards to prevailing ideology, it seems that Finns are somewhat unsure about the significance of physical appearance in attainment and to what extent it can help one progress further in life. Many Finns have experienced upward social mobility through the means of education (Erola 2010), and underlining the importance of physical appearance could be interpreted as being against the ideal of meritocracy (Holla & Kuipers 2015). It may be that because of this, achievements through education are probably easier to accept than an ascription based on physical characteristics such as looking good. It is reasonable to claim that many Finns do not want to believe that physically attractive people may be economically and socially advantaged. The belief seems to be in contrast with various empirical studies showing that in reality, the case is the opposite: what is beautiful is often good, in economic as well as social attainment.

The explanations for the contradiction are easy to come up with. The majority of previous research on the consequences of physical appearance has been conducted outside Finland and comparative studies on the topic are still rare. Thus, it is possible that physical appearance is not as prominent of a source of social stratification in Finland as it seems to be, for example, in the U.S. Another possible reason for our result is that Finns deny the fact that physical appearance matters because of the particularly held belief in the prevailing equality of opportunity in Finnish society. More research on physical appearance and social stratification would be needed to clarify, inasmuch that either of these explanations matters. The current uncertain economic situation and increased job

precarity are likely to decrease the belief in traditional personal assets such as education, and thus increase the belief in alternative forms of assets, such as physical appearance (c.f. Jones 2016).

The meritocracy approach considers physical appearance as being more biology based and not something that could be invested in and/or accumulated. In the Bourdieuan approach, however, physical appearance is first and foremost socially defined: the belief in the meaning of physical appearance varies according to social class (Bourdieu 1984). This can be considered relevant in relation to social stratification since we may argue that those who have a strong belief in physical appearance intentionally make an effort to use their physical appearance in social exchange, such as at job interviews or salary negotiations as well as develop it to its 'full potential' through appearance-related consumption practices, for instance. Furthermore, this may lead to capital accumulation.

In this paper, we have studied the belief in the importance of physical appearance from the point of view of gender and socio-economic status. Our analyses suggest that women tend to believe that physical attractiveness contributes to success in life more often than men. Following Hakim's (2010) argument, the result would suggest that women would be more likely to make an effort to intentionally use their physical appearance in social exchange. As previous research on physical appearance and social stratification suggests, this type of awareness might be somewhat relevant to women as physical appearance has been shown to be associated with their socio-economic success more often than in the case of men. We can only speculate as to whether the level of men's beliefs originates from their own experiences (something that has happened to them personally or someone near them) or whether men are just unaware of the meaning of physical attractiveness, as Hakim (2010) suggests. The fact that obese men tend to consider physical attractiveness less important than other population groups indicates that this reflects their actual experiences: despite their obesity they can/have succeeded or do not feel discriminated against. Conversely, their obesity may indicate that they are not interested in their own attractiveness. The absence of BMI differences or differences according to individually evaluated physical appearance among women, however, suggests that the meaning of physical attractiveness is a general norm that women share. The result also indicates that physical appearance related norms are still gendered: women have been more strongly socialised than men to consider physical appearance as an important asset. What our results also suggest is that women's beliefs are shaped more by the norms of their socioeconomic environments, as well as prevailing culture more generally, than by their own experiences of looking a certain way.

However, differences in belief according to respondents' own ISEI were generally the same for both men and women. As Bourdieu and contemporary arguments about the requirements of work-life suggest, the opinions of those in the middle ISEI group differed from those in lower and higher positions in the ISEI ranking. Those who have not reached the highest possible socio-economic standing appear to be-

lieve that physical attractiveness can contribute to success. This result could be interpreted as an indication of the Bourdieuan 'status panic' or the general attitude towards life that is attributed to those in the middle status positions. As Bourdieu (1984) suggests, physical appearance in middle status positions is first and foremost in the eyes of others. As belonging to the middle ISEI group is about getting somewhere i.e. upwards on the social ladder, therefore, physical appearance also appears to them as an asset that can bring them closer to these socio-economic positions. Individuals in the higher positions, on the other hand, can trust other assets such as education and acquired special skills. Again, this might be something they have experienced by themselves or by their socio-economic peer groups.

It could also be argued that appearance-related beliefs reflect first and foremost the internal battle for the middle status positions, but also the willingness to separate oneself from lower status group. As these results are closely related to occupational standing, rather than other aspects of socioeconomic status - such as education and income - it is likely that these findings are related to expectations in the late-modern job market that apply to both women and men. Those in highest socio-economic positions can rely on their other qualifications, whereas the greater masses of middle class representatives with identical CVs and job experience might have to compete against each other in the job market with qualities such as physical appearance. For example, in its current economic situation, Finland, where middle class occupations are undergoing significant change, the types of qualities, such as physical appearance, may become even more important. With regards to social stratification, the beliefs of the middle ISEI group are relevant as they are more likely to make an effort to intentionally use their physical appearance in social exchange and by doing so, increase their advantages over those in lower status positions.

Furthermore, with regards to the nonexistence of the gender differences within middle status group, it could be argued that middle status men are likely to be well aware of the significance of physical attractiveness as they can no longer rely only on their earning power to succeed in mating markets. In addition, consumer culture promotes the importance of physical attractiveness primarily to a middle-class audience, who seem to take this message more seriously than people in other positions, regardless of gender.

In addition, the results indicated that a spouse's SES is associated with the perceived importance of physical attractiveness for success, but the associations were not gendered in the way that we expected. Though women with a high-status spouse considered physical attractiveness to be more important than women with middle- or low-status spouses, the 'trophy wife' effect did not appear as this result did not depend on the women's own status. In summary, it is the women's own SES per se and the SES of women's spouses per se, that seem to contribute the most to their beliefs.

There are also some limitations in our analysis. First, our analytic sample is rather limited and it may be that some of our initial assumptions are not supported because of the lack of statistical power. For instance, we were unable to analyse

in a more detailed manner the interactions between gender, one's own physical appearance (BMI) and the 'trophy wife' effect mentioned above. Second, our measurement of one's own physical appearance, BMI, is one-dimensional and cannot cover multiple, other aspects related to perceived appearance. Furthermore, due to its inability to distinguish different body compositions, BMI can, in some cases, be a misleading indicator of attractiveness as very muscular and obese people can have the same value in the index (for a discussion see e.g. Johansson et al. 2009). Thus, the results should be interpreted with caution and more research is therefore needed. Nonetheless, we hope that our paper can also serve as a starting point for future discussion on the importance of physical appearance in Finnish society.

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