

BY ROBERT J. BARRO

SO YOU WANT TO HIRE THE BEAUTIFUL. WELL, WHY NOT?



IT MATTERS:
A worker's appearance is as legitimate a qualification as intelligence and experience -so the government should butt out

In times past, stewardesses were often attractive women, which added to the pleasure of many heterosexual male air travelers. Gradually, since a 1971 lawsuit against Pan Am, however, stewardesses have become flight attendants, who are much less likely to be attractive and are sometimes male.

Many people view these changes as progress. Instead of pandering to the tastes of straight male customers, airlines now largely ignore such traits as sex, age, marital status, and appearance and focus instead on qualifications and seniority. Is it not a good thing if flight attendants are selected by job skills, meaning the ability to serve people well and to carry out safety procedures efficiently, and not at all on physical appearance?

I would say no. I believe the only meaningful measure of productivity is the amount a worker adds to customer satisfaction and to the happiness of co-workers. A worker's physical appearance, to the extent that it is valued by customers and co-workers, is as legitimate a job qualification as intelligence, dexterity, job experience, and personality.

Almost everyone can recognize that severing the link between wages and intelligence would reduce efficiency or lower the gross national product because brain power would not be allocated to its most productive uses. Yet outcomes based on intelligence are clearly unfair in the sense that, by and large, smarter people end up richer, and being smart is to a considerable extent a matter of luck. If one wanted the government to redistribute resources from smart to stupid people, then one would have to believe that the benefits from this redistribution would exceed the resulting losses in national product.

The same reasoning applies to physical appearance. This trait is highly valued in some fields, and reducing its importance to employment and wages would effectively throw away national product. The outcomes are also unfair, in the same sense as they are for intelligence. An interference with the market's valuation of physical appearance is justified only if the benefits from the redistribution of resources from more attractive to less attractive people are greater than the losses in overall product. Thus, it makes no sense to say that basing employment and wages on physical appearance is a form of discrimination, whereas basing them on intelligence is not. The two cases are fundamentally the same.

Most people (and the law) accept this approach to beauty for movie and television personalities and modeling. Obviously, there would be a great loss of national product if the government were to dictate that Cindy Crawford had to be replaced by me in all of her commercials. But the difference between glamour fields and others in terms of the role of physical appearance is merely a matter of degree. If the government stays out, the market will generate a premium for beauty based on the values that customers and co-workers place on physical appearance in various fields. Probably the market will allocate more beauty to movies, television, and modeling than to assembly-line production and economic research. I have no idea how much beauty the unfettered market would allocate to flight-attendant jobs or CEO positions. But whatever the outcomes, are the judgments of government preferable to those of the marketplace?

Some solace can be taken from last fall's Hooter's settlement, which allows the restaurant chain to continue to limit its service staff to attractive young women. Physical appearance remains legally as a "bona fide occupational qualification" in this business. Of course, economic reasoning would imply that physical appearance is always a bona fide worker characteristic as long as customers and co-workers think so.

UGLY STATS. Research studies, such as those by Daniel S. Hamermesh and Jeff E. Biddle in the 1994 *American Economic Review*, indicate that the wage differential between attractive and ugly people is about 10% for both sexes. The differential is substantially greater for women if one considers outcomes in the marriage market. Less attractive, or at least obese, women are much less likely to marry than non-obese women and tend to have husbands with sharply lower earnings. Some researchers have greeted these findings with regret.

To really address this hard fact of life, ugliness would have to be protected as a disability under the Americans with Disabilities Act, and the act would have to be extended to the marriage market. After all, what could be more unfair than the tendency of attractive people to obtain higher-earning mates? Perhaps a better idea than this new intervention would be for the government to stay out of the beauty business.

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