

Research shows physical appearance affects career success in economics

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Since the beginning of her career, Economics Professor Galina Hale has pursued questions about who is represented within the field and who is left out. Some of her prior research has explored the role of gender in

the economics profession. And most recently, she's been studying how physical appearance affects long-term career success for economists.

"In academics, we really want to believe that it's all about merit," Hale said. "There are some papers showing that teaching evaluations are better for better-looking faculty, and you could maybe make the argument that, if you're more [attractive](#), students pay more attention. But for academic research, I'm just crunching data, so what does it matter what I look like?"

In her latest working [paper](#), Hale and coauthors investigated this question by following the careers of 752 economists who graduated from top economics doctoral programs in the United States between 2002 and 2006. The research team was surprised to find that, in fact, [physical attractiveness](#) was a strong and persistent predictor for both job outcomes and research success.

To determine relative attractiveness among the economists, a random group of 241 online survey workers rated photos of each economist in the sample. Then researchers compared these ratings with economists' [career](#) outcomes over a 15-year period. The first interesting finding was that attractive individuals were more likely to study at higher-ranked Ph.D. programs. Women's looks in top programs were particularly skewed toward the higher end of the attractiveness scale, compared to their male colleagues.

After [graduate school](#), both male and female economists who ranked higher in attractiveness landed better first jobs, and attractive individuals continued to find better academic job placements up to 15 years later. Looks were also related to research success. While more attractive economists didn't necessarily publish more papers, their papers were cited more often by other researchers. These trends held up even after controlling for the effect of the ranking of the university each [economist](#)

attended or where they got their first job.

The connection between attractiveness and research citations was particularly surprising, but Hale suspects it's related to the fact that many economists present their papers at conferences, which links their physical appearance to their research. Overall, the influence of attractiveness may indicate implicit bias, and there could be a correlation with racial inequality too.

"The very obvious implication is that we really shouldn't discriminate against people who are not judged to be as attractive as others," Hale said. "The other part of the problem is: what are the attractiveness standards in the cultural group that dominates the profession?"

The survey workers who rated photos for the study were predominantly white, and their rankings of attractiveness did differ across races of the rated economists. Specifically, men who "looked Asian" to survey workers were rated lower than white peers. But biases in the economics profession may not fully explain what's impacting career success.

Hale and her coauthors learned from psychology literature that people who are considered more attractive get more positive reinforcement as they grow up, which can affect confidence in adulthood. Confidence, in turn, could affect career success.

"It's very hard to disentangle this," Hale said. "If one reason why papers are cited more often is that they're presented in front of peers better or more often, perhaps people are invited to conferences more because they're better presenters. And perhaps they're better presenters because they grew up better looking and are more confident and comfortable with public speaking."

If that's the case, Hale says interventions could actually begin in early

childhood to help set the next generation up for [success](#). But in the meantime, the economics profession—and academia as a whole—has a lot of work to do in order to understand and correct for biases within the field.

More information: Do Looks Matter for An Academic Career in Economics? [cepr.org/content/free-dp-downl... mic-career-economics](https://cepr.org/content/free-dp-downloads/mic-career-economics)

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