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Do Good Looks Equal Good Evaluations?

By GABRIELA MONTELL

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Professors aren't known for fussing about their looks, but the results of a new study suggest they may have to if they want better teaching evaluations.

Daniel Hamermesh, a professor of economics at the University of Texas at Austin, and Amy Parker, one of his students, found that attractive professors consistently outscore their less comely colleagues by a significant margin on student evaluations of teaching. The findings, they say, raise serious questions about the use of student evaluations as a valid measure of teaching quality.

In their study, Mr. Hamermesh and Ms. Parker asked students to look at photographs of 94 professors and rate their beauty. Then they compared those ratings to the average student evaluation scores for the courses taught by those professors. The two found that the professors who had been rated among the most beautiful scored a point higher than those rated least beautiful (that's a substantial difference, since student evaluations don't generally vary by much).

While it's not news that beauty trumps brains in many quarters, you would think that the ivory tower would be relatively exempt from such shallowness.

Not so, says Rocky Kolb, a professor of astronomy and astrophysics at the University of Chicago, who notes that teaching, like acting, is a kind of performance art in which looks play a part. Besides, even nerds must answer to beauty standards (albeit lower ones), says Mr. Kolb, who posed in 1996 for a calendar featuring hot scientists, called the "Studmuffins of Science."

He added: "It's a little known fact that the Royal Swedish Academy of Sciences has a swimsuit competition for the Nobel Prize."

Anyone who thinks looks don't count in academe is foolish, says Judith Waters, a psychology professor at Fairleigh Dickinson University who studies the relationship of physical beauty to aging, income, and work. "It's sad that they make such a difference, and I'm sure there are many people who are going to read this and say, 'Well, they don't matter to me.' But they matter to large numbers of other people, including students," she says.

James M. Lang made that discovery. Mr. Lang has always earned high marks from his students at Assumption College, but he doesn't consider himself a "Baldwin" (for the clueless, that's a term for a hot guy, popularized by the movie *Clueless*). Apparently, though, some of his students do. More than one of them has made comments about his "buns" on student evaluations.

Now the assistant professor of English says he's self-conscious about his looks and his teaching. "I work very hard at my teaching," he says, "and I am a little disturbed at the possibility that students are evaluating my courses based on such a superficial criterion." He wonders if he's as good a teacher as he thought he was, and he's afraid to turn his back to his classes to write on the chalkboard.

Kate Antonovics says she can relate. The 33-year-old assistant professor of economics is a "Betty" (that's slang for a gorgeous woman, also from *Clueless*) in her students' eyes. She has gotten e-mail messages from her students at the University of California at San Diego that include remarks such as, "Where do you shop? My friends and I can't get over how cute your outfits always are (I suppose because of the usual professor clothing-style stereotype ... which I apologize for)," and "I think you are very very hot." (One student even asked her on a date in the middle of the semester. She declined.)

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Despite some awkward moments, Ms. Antonovics (who also gets high ratings from students on her teaching evaluations) says she's not bothered by all the remarks. "I mostly think they're hysterical," she says. "I've never felt like I'm getting good evaluations just because they think I'm attractive." And if students like her, and her teaching, then maybe they're paying better attention in class, she says.

Mr. Hamermesh says his student ratings are above average, but his looks are average -- though he adds, "Hopefully, I'm being too harsh on myself." Twenty years ago a young woman wrote on one of the professor's evalutions, "Snacks in bed with you would be exciting and economically beneficial," but besides that, the only comments he's gotten related to his appearance have been about his neckties (generally favorable) and his cowboy hats (also generally favorable, though one student once wrote, "All hat, no cattle").

The big question, he says, is: Do students discriminate against homely professors, or are attractive professors better teachers?

Unfortunately, the study is inconclusive on that count. But if the answer is that students discriminate, "and if you think this beauty variable really shouldn't matter, and yet it does, then maybe we should discount teaching evaluations somewhat," Mr. Hamermesh says, "because clearly they are affected by something which most of us would argue should not be something that we should be accounting for."

Some male professors also may be dismayed about another finding of the study: "Good looks generated more of a premium, and bad looks more of a penalty, for male instructors," say Mr. Hamermesh and Ms. Parker in a paper about their findings, "Beauty in the Classroom: Professors' Pulchritude and Putative Pedagogical Productivity." According to their data, the effect of beauty (or lack thereof) on teaching evaluations for men was three times as great as it was for women.

The two also found that both female and minority professors earned lower overall ratings for their teaching than their white, male peers. That finding is worrisome, but hardly astonishing, says Susan Basow, a professor of psychology at Lafayette College. "It just shows that white, native-speaking males are still the norm for professors in students' eyes. When they think of a professor, they think of a Mr. Chips type." More surprising, she says, was the finding that the teaching ratings for men were more affected by their looks.

Dina Ibrahim, who is herself no stranger to objectification by students, says she can't help being amused by the notion that men are being judged on their looks more than women are. "It's nice to have the males objectified for a change," says the assistant professor of broadcast journalism at San Francisco State University. Every semester, Ms. Ibrahim, who is from Egypt, must put up with student comments like, "She can be my Egyptian queen any day."

Of course, not all student comments are flattering. A glance at Web sites such as ProfessorPerformance.com and RateMyProfessors.com -- where students rate their instructors on criteria such as coolness, clarity, easiness, helpfulness, and hotness (on RateMyProfessors.com, hot professors get chili peppers beside their names) -- leaves little doubt about the viciousness of some students. Petty comments abound: "Someone fire this fat bastard" and "Looks like a hobbit, is not a nice person!"

Harold Glasser has been a victim of such comments. One of his students posted the following remarks on ProfessorPerformance.com: "Glasser where's (sic) the same blue fleece sweatercoat thing, and this awful matching blue fleece hat that looks like the one Elmer Fudd wore. If this wasn't enough, he has some of the same mannerisms as Dr. Evil," from the Austin Powers movies.

Mr. Glasser, an assistant professor of environmental studies at Western Michigan University, says he doesn't take such remarks seriously. "I care more about my teaching than what I wear. I think my appearance is irrelevant." Besides, he adds, "I don't even have a blue fleece sweatercoat."

Students are not the only ones in the academy biased by looks, says Ms. Waters, the psychology professor at Fairleigh Dickinson. When she first started teaching, she says, she was a little on the chubby side. "But after I went on a crash diet, my faculty evaluations went up," she recalls. "I wanted to laugh. I'm the same person, yet suddenly I'm a genius?"

Unfortunately, professors who look more like Gollum and less like Aragorn (aka Viggo Mortensen) may have their work cut out for them. "Looks shouldn't count, but clearly they do," Ms. Ibrahim says. "That means ugly professors have to really,

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really know what they're talking about if they want to get good evaluations, as horrible as that sounds. They have to work harder."

Short of botox injections and plastic surgery, there's not a lot professors can do about the looks they were born with, so most of them should focus on improving the things they can control -- like dress, grooming and, above all, their teaching, says Ms. Basow of Lafayette College.

The good news is that looks are just one of many factors that affect student evaluations. In addition, the bar for beauty is probably low for academics (beautiful professors are about as rare as genius members of the World Wrestling Federation, says the University of Chicago's Mr. Kolb), so clearing it may be easier.

Upon hearing about the study's findings, one anthropology professor (who asked for anonymity), said, "Given this information, I'm wondering if I'm better looking than I thought I was because my evaluations have been so good."

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