



# Beauty and Meritocracy

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## 1 Introduction: A System of Beliefs that Maintains and Produces Beauty-Based Inequalities?

For decades, economists, (social) psychologists, and sociologists have analysed the outcomes of beauty, and shown how beauty is related to different kinds of economic and symbolic rewards (for reviews, see Anderson et al., 2010; Holla & Kuipers, 2015; Kukkonen et al., 2024; see also Raudenska, this volume; Kühn & Wolbring, this volume). Additionally, several social scientists have been able to shed light on the social processes through which beauty translates into these perks and penalties (e.g. Mears, 2020; Warhurst & Nickson, 2020; see also De Keere, Sarpila & Vonk, this volume). In this chapter, we zoom out from the consequences of beauty and the everyday social practices through which people end up being treated differently based on their appearance. Moreover, we also depart from existing research on what people consider beautiful in other people. Instead, we focus on beauty as a belief system. We argue that the belief in

beauty as, to a certain extent, an achievable merit legitimizes beauty-based social inequalities.

But what exactly constitutes merit and how should it be defined in relation to beauty? Meritocratic characteristics are generally understood as ones that relate to personal achievements through individual effort and talent and consequently, deservingness. A clear example of this is: hard work. Non-meritocratic characteristics, on the other hand, pertain to various ‘inherited’ attributes, mostly related to group memberships, such as gender, ethnic minority status, being born into a (non)wealthy family or knowing the right people (e.g. Lindner et al., 2024; Mijs, 2021). However, applying such categorizations of merit versus non-merit to the study of beauty and inequality is far from straightforward. This complexity is linked to what the entire handbook at hand portrays: the varying views on what beauty entails and the extent to which it is determined by ‘innate characteristics’ acquired at birth, as opposed to being the result of people’s own efforts in beauty and body work.

Daniel Hamermesh—a widely cited economist also in this handbook and a certain kind of pioneer in the study of beauty and inequalities—has argued that beauty is first and foremost an inherent trait that cannot be significantly improved through beauty work practices (Hamermesh, 2011). However, some other scholars have

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been more receptive to the possibilities of altering one's appearance, seeing it as a combination of good genes and individual investments of time, money and effort (e.g. Hakim, 2010; see also Raudenska, this volume; Smith & Hamplova, this volume). In contrast, in the field of cultural sociology as well as race and gender studies, several researchers argue that beauty should be considered primarily an ascribed characteristic. This is because beauty and body work are gendered, classed, raced and sexualized practices. As a result, beauty standards often reflect dominant standards, and especially for marginalized social groups, 'beauty' as defined by dominant cultural groups can be very hard to attain (e.g. Craig, 2021; Holla & Kuipers, 2015; Mears, 2014; see also Kuipers, Sarpila & Brans, this volume).

If scholars do not agree on the meritocratic nature of beauty, lay people may not either. Additionally, beliefs about individuals' control over their appearance are likely to vary depending on whether discussing, for instance, body weight or facial features. Such belief systems about the social world matter because they help to sustain the existing social order, legitimize social inequalities and even hamper social mobility (e.g. Markovits, 2019; Mijs, 2021; Piketty, 2020; Sandel, 2020). Therefore, it is important to examine what people actually believe when considering beauty through the lens of a meritocratic belief system.

We have structured this chapter as follows. First, we briefly introduce the ideas of merit and meritocracy, drawing on previous literature in socio-economics. After that, we review prevailing approaches to beauty and merit. First, we will outline debates on beauty as an achieved versus ascribed characteristic, followed by existing discussions on beauty as a meritocratic belief system. Following this, we will examine Finnish beliefs through a brief empirical case. Finally, we will discuss how the prevailing belief system can support and perpetuate beauty-based inequalities, and propose ideas how research on the topic could be continued in future.

## 2 The Idea of Merit and Meritocracy

The idea of meritocracy, where merit determines, for example, the educational and occupational opportunities available to an individual, was originally coined by Michael Young in 1958. In his novel, he described a dystopian society governed by the meritorious. While Young's intention was actually to warn against the dangers of meritocracy (Young, 2001), the concept has been instead adopted as a societal ideal and part of political rhetoric. This idea of 'equality of opportunity' and merit-based rewards has been particularly enthusiastically embraced in the realms of education and labour markets (e.g. Friedman & Laurison, 2020; Sandel, 2020; see also De Keere, Sarpila & Vonk, this volume).

Over six decades after Michael Young's (1958) seminal novel, the discourse on meritocracy seems perhaps more relevant than ever. The increasing inequality has been widely reported, and one might think that people's critical attitudes towards meritocracy would have also grown. However, the reality seems to be quite the opposite. For example, Jonathan Mijs's study (2021) covering 23 countries over a 25-year period shows that belief in meritocracy and increasing income inequality paradoxically go hand in hand. A similar finding was obtained in a study conducted by Mijs and Mike Savage (2020), which examined belief in meritocracy and income inequality over 80-year period in the UK. In other words, as inequalities increase, people are also more likely to believe that they are justified. Everyone gets what they deserve depending on how hard they have worked (Benabou & Tirole, 2006). The results just 'happens' to be that some get more and some get less.

The same research shows that people not only have learned to tolerate the inequalities present in their society and social environment, but also to legitimize their own privilege and achievement as the result of merit. Researchers have found that both members of the elite and so-called ordinary people tend to justify the advantages they have gained with their own talent and personal efforts (Friedman et al., 2024; Kantola & Kuusela, 2019;

Mijs & Savage, 2020). Neither does the general belief in meritocracy consider people's societal position. At least in the US and the UK, belief in meritocracy has grown among both the middle class and the working class, for the latter group even more so than the former (Mijs, 2022).

However, the well-recognized problem with meritocratic justifications is that the things considered as merits are never solely the result of an individual's own efforts. A good example of this is intelligence, which Young (1958) originally identified as the second key component of merit along with 'effort'. Indeed, both historically and nowadays, intelligence has often been regarded as something for which individuals can be fairly rewarded (Friedman et al., 2024; Mijs, 2016). At the same time, it is acknowledged that intelligence is both achieved and ascribed, although there is ongoing debate about the emphasis on these two aspects (for discussion see, e.g., Guo & Stearns, 2002; Van Deursen & Van Dijk, 2023).

The analogy of intelligence may clarify the issue of beauty. Both concepts, intelligence and beauty, can be considered both ascribed and achieved, i.e. both acquired at birth and achieved by one's own efforts. Additionally, there is ongoing debate about whether ascribed or achieved qualities are more relevant. For example, just as intelligence can be perceived as developed through practice and learning, beauty can be thought of as something that can be enhanced and improved through various beauty treatments and products. While meritocracy research has largely ignored the significance of beauty in its examinations, the field of beauty and inequality research has at least to some extent debated the nature of beauty as merit versus non-merit characteristics. Next, we will delve into these discussions.

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### 3 Beauty as an Ascribed Versus an Achieved Characteristic

In sociological stratification research, beauty has traditionally been seen as a characteristic that people can somewhat modify through their own efforts. Already in the 1980s, Webster and Driskell (1983) argued in their publication 'Beauty and

Status'—which has become one of the classics in the field—that beauty differs from other traditional status characteristics precisely because it is partly given and partly achieved. Unlike gender and race, beauty is, according to them, a characteristic that can be subject to minor adjustments, for example, through clothing and cosmetics, and major modifications through cosmetic surgical procedures. Referring to the rapidly growing beauty and body work industry at the time, they argued that the significance of attractiveness as a source of inequality would increase in future, while the importance of traditional status characteristics would diminish (Webster & Driskell, 1983). When the study of beauty and inequality truly came to life among stratification researchers in the 2000s, numerous stratification researchers were clearly inspired by this idea. Catherine Hakim (2010) has made the achievement perspective particularly well known. She has even argued that beauty and sexuality can be meritoriously worked on, and women, in particular, should engage in working on their 'erotic capital' to gain upward mobility. According to her, 'Beauty and sex appeal, and female beauty in particular, are a creation, a work of art, which can be achieved through training' (Hakim, 2010, p. 504; see also Pieters, this volume). Along these lines, beauty as a combination of acquired and achieved attribute has been emphasized in many recent stratification studies that have examined different outcomes of beauty (e.g. Anýžová & Matějů, 2018; Wong & Penner, 2016; see also Raudenska, this volume; Smith & Hamplova, this volume).

Perhaps somewhat surprisingly, economist Daniel Hamermesh, who has inspired many stratification researchers with his beauty studies, has been rather doubtful about people's chances to improve their looks. Based on his own research, he has actually suggested that individuals' investments in their looks do not pay off, and that beauty work neither significantly increases an individual's attractiveness ratings nor their salary. In fact, he claims that a one-dollar 'investment' in beauty is more likely to be just one dollar of pure spending, and there is reason to be sceptical about people receiving actual rewards from

their beauty work (Hamermesh, 2011; Hamermesh et al., 2002). For some reason, Hamermesh has, however, been more inclined to define ugliness rather than beauty as an ascribed characteristic. He has defined lookism specifically as discrimination against ‘ugly’ people, who are born and grow up ‘bad-looking’. Similarly, some philosophers have also ended up reflecting on the meritocratic nature of beauty in relation to appearance-based discrimination, specifically through the lens of ugliness. In these reflections, ugliness is inevitably more ‘given’ than beauty because it is linked to direct disabilities with which some people are born or that may result from events during their lives, altering their appearance regardless of their will (Mason & Minerva, 2020). At the same time, matters related to external style are framed as people’s choices or something individuals can control. However, punishing people for these ‘choices’ is not clearly justified mostly because people should have right to individual self-expression. From the perspective of discrimination, legal scholars and philosophers have interpreted this to mean that even if certain aspects of appearance can be considered modifiable and under individual control, placing people in unequal positions based on these aspects can still violate the ‘merit principle’ (Mason & Minerva, 2020; Rhode, 2010; see also Mason & Midtgaard, this volume).

However, from the perspective of cultural and gender studies, the idea of appearance as a merit seems absurd. This stems from the understanding shared within these fields that, most importantly, what is ultimately valued as an achievement in one’s own and others’ appearance is deeply embedded in social hierarchies and societal power structures (e.g. Craig, 2021; Holla & Kuipers, 2015; Mears, 2014; see also Kuipers, Sarpila & Brans, this volume). In cultural sociology, these hierarchies are primarily considered class based as both the beauty practices individuals engage in and the ways in which people appreciate or evaluate others’ beauty and body practices are shaped, at least in the European context, primarily by their social class. In other words, the way people modify their appearance and interpret others’ modified appearances is cues

of social class helping individuals locate themselves and others in class hierarchies (Bourdieu, 1984; Vandebroek, 2016; Kuipers, 2015; see also Kuipers, Chow, Chong & Zhou, this volume). This means that from a cultural sociological perspective, the modifiable aspects of appearance are never entirely under individual control or freely chosen, as they are rooted in structural factors, namely the opportunities provided by cultural and economic capital to modify one’s appearance. Additionally, several scholars have emphasized the importance of an intersectional approach, where not only social class but also gender and race-related hierarchies define what is considered the ‘right’ appearance, which is predominantly white, middle class and feminine (Mears, 2014; Menon, this volume; see also Craig, this volume). Thus, not all people can inherently have equal opportunities to achieve an appearance that is valued as a merit. Therefore, labelling external style as a merit has been seen as a way to legitimize inequalities and even discrimination based on these social categories, especially in the workplace (Vonk, 2024; see also De Keere, Sarpila & Vonk, this volume).

This brings us to the point that, from the perspective of social inequalities, it is not necessarily that essential to what extent beauty is ‘factually’ ascribed and to what extent it is achieved, but rather to what extent people believe in beauty as a merit and thus justified. Before we proceed to examine through our empirical example to what extent people believe in beauty as a merit, we will look at how the issue has been approached in previous research literature on beauty and inequalities.

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#### 4 Beauty as a Meritocratic Belief System

Beauty as a belief system has also been touched upon in previous research on beauty and inequality (Forbes et al., 2007; Kukkonen, 2021; Sarpila & Erola, 2016; Widdows, 2018). This perspective differs fundamentally from those presented in the previous subsection in that it does not attempt to address the extent to which beauty can actually be

achieved and to what extent it cannot. Instead, it is essential to consider how *beliefs in beauty* as at least some form of merit help maintain the system where beauty shapes social inequalities.

Vandebroek (2016) has analysed how the meritocratic belief in education (in its broadest sense) has extended to body size and shape, which can be worked on through hard work to achieve the desired outcome. Indeed, for people to be willing to ‘invest’ in beauty, it is crucial that they believe beauty matters, can be worked upon, and is worth striving towards (Widdows, 2018). It is through similar beliefs that, for example, physical markers of class (such as body shape and size) come to be naturalized and treated as simple lifestyle *choices* of individual responsibility (Vandebroek, 2016; see also Vandebroek & Kuipers, this volume). In a similar vein, Widdows argues in this volume that beauty and the pursuit of it have become a kind of ethical ideal. This means that it is an absolute virtue to strive towards the beauty ideal through beauty and body work, and this ideal is supported by a widely shared belief system: ‘We believe that if we conform to the four features of the beauty ideal—thinness, firmness, smoothness, and youth—we will have a better life, we will succeed, we will be good’.

In feminist literature, the ideology of beauty as a woman’s asset (and responsibility) has been discussed and contested by strands of feminism throughout the history of feminism (e.g. Bartky, 1990; Dworkin, 1974; Peiss, 1998; Rhode, 2016; see also Craig, this volume). According to this understanding, women have been schooled to invest in their bodily demeanour and looks; pages and pages of manuals have been written on the topic of how women could and should strive towards beauty and thus embody higher status as well as ‘better’ femininity (cf. Lennox, 2016; Stewart, 2001). Feminist writer Naomi Wolf (2013) famously claimed this myth of beauty as a meritocratic means of success for women is consuming women and standing in their way as they strive for higher positions in society and working life. According to her idea of the ‘beauty myth’, the stress put on female beauty increases whenever women gain more access to power in society.

Arguably, the stress that culture puts on beauty as a feminine investment strategy has increased in recent decades with the rise of so-called postfeminist culture (Gill, 2007, 2017), in which feminism is at the same time accepted yet repudiated (McRobbie, 2009). Postfeminist culture celebrates empowered and flawless ‘bossgirls’ and ‘bossladies’, who *choose* to work on themselves and succeed, due to their ‘merit’ as *aspirational individuals* (Gill, 2007, 2017; McRobbie, 2009; Ringrose & Walkerdine, 2008; Winch, 2013). The (female) self is regarded as an entrepreneurial project, the proceeding of which is hypervisible and focuses on appearances as much as subjectivity (ibid.). Critics of postfeminist culture suggest that such a focus on individual feminine empowerment obstructs social change towards gender equality. Indeed, this line of cultural criticism mirrors Naomi Wolf’s beauty myth thesis by pointing out how the quest for success by means of appearances may stand in the way of women’s flourishing (cf. Adamson & Salmenniemi, 2017). In sum, feminist scholars have expressed considerable wariness about beauty as a meritocratic road to female success and pointed out how beliefs about beauty can matter for social (in)equality.

While the belief system surrounding beauty and inequality has indeed interested scholars in the field, the beliefs of people themselves have not been studied. At the same time, in the field of meritocracy research the nature of appearance and the meanings attributed to it have been overlooked. In the following section, we aim to bridge these two fields: we examine the beliefs that ordinary people associate with appearance, both as an inherent and as an achieved characteristic. In addition, we analyse to what extent the idea of deservingness connect with different aspects of appearance as a merit.

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## 5 Empirical Case: Beauty and Meritocratic Beliefs in Finland

Finnish society is an interesting context for the study of meritocratic beliefs. In comparison with other societies, even within Europe, Finns

have traditionally idealized equality (Kangas, 1995; OECD, 2021) and avoided self-promotion (Sarpila et al., 2021). For example, previous studies among the adult population reveal not only a notably elevated proportion of Finns identifying as working class compared to other affluent European nations (Reeves, 2019) and a tendency to downplay rather than accentuating their own social standing, for instance, through lifestyle preferences (Kantola & Kuusela, 2019; see also Purhonen et al., 2010). Regarding beauty and body work, moderateness is expected not only from oneself but also from others (Sarpila et al., 2020).

This is the context in which we decided to study people's beliefs about beauty as a merit through a quantitative survey. However, operationalizing the central concepts was not straightforward, as, to our knowledge, this has not been done before. We also encountered a double challenge: what do we mean by appearance, and secondly, what do we mean by merit?

In our empirical example, we approach this problem by deconstructing the concept of appearance into various dimensions. We assume that appearance consists of aspects that can be understood in fundamentally different ways from the perspective of modification. Previous research has mapped beauty outcomes for a range of such aspects of appearance, ranging from cleanliness (easily modified), weight (modified but with difficulty) to height (very difficult to modify) (see, e.g., Anderson et al., 2010). In addition, we simplify the analysis by adopting a perspective in which respondents are initially asked to express their views on the extent to which individuals can influence different dimensions of appearance, and secondly, how much value should be assigned to these dimensions of appearance. The questions themselves were presented as part of a broader online survey on appearance-related themes. For the survey, a random sample of individuals aged 18 to 64 was drawn from the Finnish population register, who were approached via regular postal letters. The survey received responses from 1007 participants.<sup>1</sup>

First, we asked the respondents to what extent they believe that other people can modify their own appearance. We asked separately about (1) height, (2) skin colour, (3) body weight, (4) muscularity, (5) cleanliness and neatness, (6) facial traits, (7) facial attractiveness and (8) style. Figure 1 illustrates these findings. As depicted, Finns perceive cleanliness and neatness, as well as style as aspects of appearance that people can significantly influence. Over 90 per cent of Finns are positive that people can impact their cleanliness and neatness, and more than 80 per cent think people can impact their style at least quite much. More than half of Finns also believe weight and muscularity can be at least quite much worked upon and achieved, whereas less than 10 per cent of Finns believe weight and muscularity cannot be impacted very much or at all. In contrast, facial traits, height and skin colour are believed to be largely given traits. Facial attractiveness clearly divides opinions.

Particularly in the context of facial attractiveness, but also in terms of muscularity, the question arises as to what kind of person the respondents were thinking of when answering the question—primarily a woman or a man? It is well known that the possibilities for modifying muscularity are fundamentally different between women and men due to biological reasons. On the other hand, modifying facial attractiveness might be closely linked to people's perceptions of female beauty practices. This may partly explain the distribution of the responses into different response categories.

Overall, it seems that Finns consider external style something largely under individual control. The same applies to body shape and size, as in fact, very few think that these cannot be worked upon at

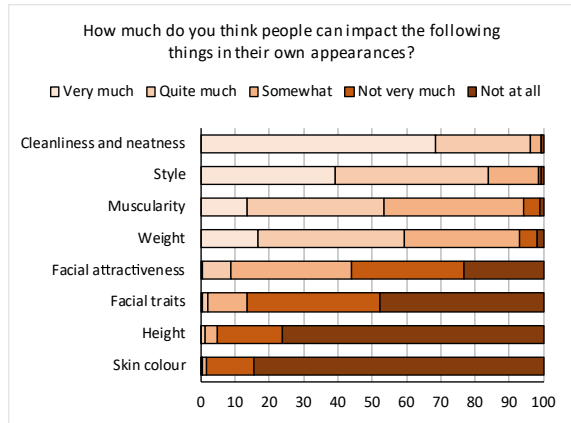
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appearance, as well as a section focusing on respondents' backgrounds. A simple random sample of 5000 Finnish-speaking Finns aged 18–64 was obtained from the Finnish population register, and invitations to participate in the survey were sent out by mail. We also sent out reminders to participate in the survey by text message as well as by postal service. The final total of respondents was 1007. The response rate hence reached just above 20 per cent. Women and people with higher levels of education are overrepresented among respondents. In order to improve the representativeness of our results, we utilize population weights based on gender, age and education level in all analyses.

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<sup>1</sup>The survey included a quasi-experimental section with six vignettes, a section with beliefs about inequality and

**Fig. 1** Finns’ perceptions of ascribed and achieved appearance-related traits (N = 971)<sup>2</sup>



least to some extent. However, these are precisely the aspects of appearance that the tradition of cultural sociology sees as highly class-related; styles on grooming and clothing (see Karademir, this volume; De Keere, Sarpila & Vonk, this volume) but also corpulence mark class boundaries (see Vandebroeck & Kuipers, this volume). This may partly relate to the country context in which the research was conducted as in previous studies it has been argued that Finns, in general, are not necessarily very sensitive to identifying differences related to social classes (Sarpila, 2021; cf. Purhonen et al., 2010). One explanation for this blindness may lie in the strong national narrative among Finns of being a country of equality and homogeneity. Yet, this contradicts, for example, the internationally significant wealth disparities (Pfeffer & Waitkus, 2021) and the strong presence of an elite (Kantola & Kuusela, 2019) in Finnish society.

However, people’s perceptions of the extent to which appearance can be considered modifiable and under individual control do not directly indicate the extent to which they are considered merits. To examine this, we used the idea of legitimacy and asked to what extent different aspects of appearance *should* affect people’s success in life. We used people’s perception of ‘hard work’ as a benchmark, which has been employed in previous

studies as a measure of traditional meritocratic belief (Friedman et al., 2024; Mijs, 2021).

Figure 2 indicates that the order of the dimensions of appearance as justified means of getting ahead in life follows the ‘achievement-based hierarchy’ of the same dimensions presented in Fig. 1. In other words, the more a dimension is perceived as something an individual can influence, the more it is also accepted as a legitimate factor contributing to ‘deserved’ success. The figure also reveals that although hard work is at the top, some of the appearance-related factors, notably cleanliness and neatness, are not far from this traditional measure of merit in their acceptability as factors influencing success.

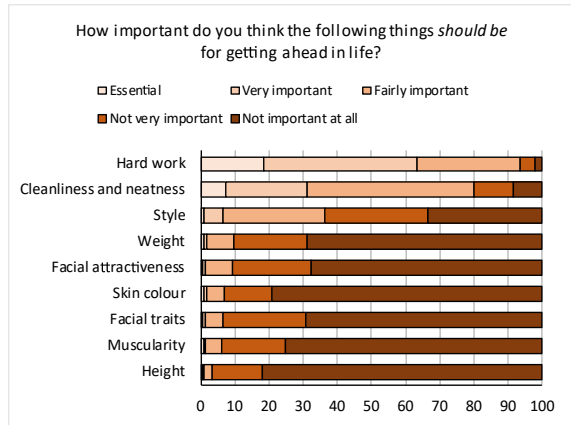
In sum, our descriptive empirical case suggests a belief system that perpetuates social inequalities not only between social classes but also between men and women. Previous research has shown that expectations regarding beauty and body work still predominantly target women more than men, although increasingly also men (Sarpila et al., 2020; see also Sarpila, Brans & Kuipers, this volume). At the same time, our examination raises many follow-up questions and the need for further research, which we will address at the end of this chapter.

## 6 New Avenues for Research

In this chapter, we asked to what extent beauty is believed to be an individual merit and how these beliefs can contribute to beauty-based

<sup>2</sup>All the analyses presented in the chapter are based on a random sample of individuals aged 18 to 64 drawn from the Finnish population register, with 1007 participants responding to the survey as part of a broader online survey on appearance-related themes.

**Fig. 2** Finns' attitudes towards various aspects of appearance as legitimate sources of success in life (N = 946)



inequalities. To approach this question, we have brought together two research traditions that, to our knowledge, have not been cross-pollinated before: socio-economic meritocracy research and research on beauty and inequality. We have also introduced a new angle to empirical research by approaching beauty from the perspective of merit and provided a concrete suggestion for how this can be studied.

It is clear that the relationship between beauty and merit *merits* more attention in future. This message is directed at both meritocracy researchers and those interested in the study of appearance and inequality. From the perspective of socio-economic meritocracy research, it is actually quite astonishing that the research field has not addressed beauty and appearance in any way. This seems particularly strange in the light of the fact that the topic of beauty and meritocracy brings together two current megatrends: the increasing focus on appearance and the rise of belief in meritocracy in contemporary societies. Additionally, excluding beauty and appearance from the examination of meritocratic beliefs means overlooking an entire axis of inequality, as this handbook demonstrates. Thus, paradoxically, researchers studying beliefs that perpetuate inequalities may inadvertently contribute to maintaining the status quo when areas affecting the everyday lives of all people are left unexamined. Our empirical analysis suggested, for example, that considering certain aspects of appearance as merit based may help to obscure and therefore (re)produce

class- and gender-based inequalities in contemporary appearance-focused societies. This is also an important message for those social stratification researchers interested in ‘tackling the inequality of opportunity’, who have increasingly reached towards meritocracy research but simultaneously shown no interest in the ability of appearance-based inequalities to complicate this tackling.

Our contribution also offers a variety of insights and further opportunities for the study of appearance, beauty and inequality. While some interpretations of the connection between beauty and merit have been made in existing work on beauty and inequality (e.g. Vandebroeck, 2016; Widdows, 2018; Wolf, 2013), the examination of the topic has ultimately been limited in this field as well. Empirical research on this topic has been even more scarce, likely hindered by the fact that it is not straightforward to operationalize beauty on the achieved-ascribed continuum, and that operationalizations of beauty are extremely diverse.

Our examination shows that appearance is certainly not a monolith, but truly consists of quite different components. These components, in turn, are perceived very differently in terms of how malleable they are. In other words, the somewhat shared view among researchers that people’s ability to influence their own appearance is limited (although researchers disagree on why this is) is not common knowledge among ordinary people. This also demonstrates the power of beliefs in maintaining social inequalities and the

importance of studying them among researchers interested in appearance. At the same time, this fragmentation in the understanding of the concept also means that researchers should be more precise about what they are actually discussing when they talk about ‘appearance’ and ‘beauty’—whether they refer to faces, body size and shape, external style, or something else. This precision, combined with knowledge of how people perceive different aspects of appearance along the achieved-ascribed continuum, can also help scholars to understand certain inconsistencies in studies related to appearance and inequality (see Kuipers, Sarpila & Brans, this volume). In other words, the more researchers incorporate visual materials that include not just unembellished faces, but also cues related to personal style or body weight, the more likely they are to gain insights into how appearance-based inequalities tied to gender and class operate. At the same time, our examination suggests that these aspects of appearance, which are most often understood as merits, are likely to be the ones that produce appearance-based inequalities the most. That is to say, scholars should not—as is often done—overlook such cues or try to control for them, but rather focus more on exploring these dimensions of appearance and their outcomes.

Finally, we would like to offer very concrete ideas for future empirical research that stem directly from the empirical case presented in this chapter. In our empirical case, we asked ordinary people about different aspects of appearance and requested them to evaluate to what extent they believe these traits can be influenced by people themselves and, on the other hand, to what extent it is justified for these traits to affect people’s success in life. The first natural step for further empirical research would be to analyse who supports the idea of beauty as a merit; those who benefit the most from it or, paradoxically, those who are most disadvantaged by maintaining such beliefs. The next major step would be to reconsider the formulation of the survey questions themselves. The claim under the focus of our empirical analysis is quite general and is afflicted by typical survey research problems related to question framing.

For instance, what do respondents understand by ‘success in life’? Are they thinking primarily about labour market success? Is success generally understood economically, or in some other way, such as social success or success in love? In addition to refining question formulations for more detailed exploration, future research could also focus on understanding who should be considered meritorious in terms of appearance work and deserving of recognition. For example, vignette research methods could be used to uncover potential gendered double standards in beliefs. Furthermore, surveys on appearance-related beliefs could be conducted among specific population groups, such as employers and other gatekeepers. Above all, integrating questions about appearance into international comparative studies on meritocracy would be beneficial to finally outline the broader picture of the legitimization of appearance and inequality in different cultural contexts.

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