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Modern Social Phenomenon of the Appearance Discrimination

Abstract

The article discusses the phenomenon of discrimination based on the individual's appearance. Theoretical and experimental works of Russian and foreign researchers dedicated to such kinds of discrimination as: lookism, ageism, discrimination based on weight (fat/slim) (weightism), discrimination based on height (heightism) indicate that mostly this phenomenon comes from the mass media. It provides empirical evidence for studying various aspects of appearance discrimination.

Key words: discrimination, lookism, ageism, appearance

Introduction

Appearance discrimination is prevalent and widespread. At the present stage we can notice a growing number of studies on the role of physical attraction and the visual attractiveness or unattractiveness as a factor influencing the behavior of people in various fields of life (advertising, judicial decisions, employment, elections, etc.), as well as phenomena of categorization and discrimination aimed against the appearance of another.

Every country's constitution makes an exception of discrimination; in the Russian Federation Constitution, Article 19, it is stipulated that the State 'guarantees equal rights and freedoms of man and citizen, regardless of gender, race, nationality, language, origin, property and official status, place of residence, religion, convictions, membership of public associations, as well as other circumstances. Any restrictions limiting the rights of citizens in regard to their social, racial, ethnic, linguistic or religious affiliation are forbidden. Men and women have equal rights and freedoms and equal opportunities for their realization'. In her report, S.D. Gurieva notes that in the global legal system international instruments became popular governing the ethnic and inter-ethnic relations, among which are the following: the Declaration on Race and Racial Prejudice (1978), 'Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities' (Strasbourg 1995), Declaration on the Elimination of All Forms of

Racial Discrimination, adopted at the World Conference against Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia and Related Intolerance (Durban, South Africa 2001), Declaration of the OSCE, aimed at strengthening human rights and fundamental freedoms of every individual to fight Racism, Xenophobia and Discrimination (Brussels 2004), the 'Cordoba Declaration' (Cordoba 2005), focused on anti-Semitism and other forms of intolerance which are unacceptable in the modern civil society. In the Russian legal system there are a number of official mechanisms for combating ethnic discrimination and the incitement of ethnic hatred (Gurieva 2010). However, the Constitution does not cover such types of discrimination as discrimination based on appearance (beautiful – not beautiful) or lookism, age discrimination or ageism, as well as some other types of discrimination which are mentioned in foreign studies, but little reflected in Russian works, such as discrimination based on weight (being fat/thin) (weightism), discrimination on height (heightism). These various forms of discrimination can still be observed, including forms of discrimination based on appearance. Discrimination of this ilk is instilled in us both at the level of fairy tales and cartoons, and in various aspects of life, which are demonstrated by the modern media, as well as the specifics of modern society: the facial expression control and dress code in clubs and restaurants, the lack of clothes and shoes of the right size in top class stores. The cult of youth and thinness has led to a situation in which parameters such as weight ('fat' has a much more negative connotation than 'full'), age ('old'), etc. are emphasised. On the other hand, E. John identified the term 'ingratiation' – this being all the tricks by which people try to model your image in the eyes of others, by increasing its appeal, to be able to better meet their own needs (Podguretsky 2006, p. 114).

Using different stereotypical judgments we divide people into groups based on appearance, and each of these groups is endowed with certain characteristics, which may correspond to a given group as well as constituting an unreal and distorting picture.

Lookism is a fairly new phenomenon in Russia, while in America one of the first studies related to this issue was conducted in the 1980s. Under lookism one refers to any discrimination under the influence of different and varied evaluations of what is considered to be beautiful or not beautiful. This is one of the most common themes in European research –the study of the stereotype 'beautiful – is good'. As noted by J. Olson and K. Marshuetz (Olson, Marshuetz 2005) beautiful people always get more benefits – from a higher social assessment to higher salaries. Through a theoretical analysis of this problem the authors note that almost all works on the attractiveness of appearance in one way or another affect the issue. They prove that as such a stereotype exists it often has an impact on all other evaluations.

R. Felson and J. Bohrnstedt (Felson, Bohrnstedt 1979, p. 386–392) have considered the problem of the meaning 'beautiful is good' or 'good means beautiful' in relation to school assessment. They studied the relationship of the external ratings of attractiveness and abilities (academic and physical) in the course of sociometry. In their study they asked students to name the three most beautiful students, the smartest and the most successful in sport. As a result, they have shown that children are more intelligent and physically fit in the opinion of their classmates if they are seen as beautiful.

    D. Hamermesh and A. Parker (2005) investigated the relationship of students and appearance evaluation. They found that students who are believed by teachers to have a more attractive external appearance have a higher educational evaluation. This pattern is more characteristic for men- than for women-teachers. The authors also emphasize that the assessment in some cases does not depend on the level of knowledge and is underestimated or overestimated (on average by 0.5 to -1 point) depending on the external appearance of the student and the teacher's attitude towards him. For their part, the students did not notice this trend, noting that all the estimates are fair enough. No, nothing was missed. In the second phase, during which students were investigated, it was also revealed that such an opinion as to the validity of the evaluations existed, due to the fact that students also tended to think that beautiful people are more intelligent, and therefore deserved higher ratings and marks. Thus, Hamermesh and Parker also pointed out the influence of the stereotype 'what is beautiful – is good' on the everyday life practices of ordinary people.

    In his work L.A. Nordholm (1980, p. 81–83) addressed the problem of doctor-patient interaction in relation to the stereotype of beautiful doctors and their relationship to the 'beautiful' and 'ugly' patients they treated. He found that 'beautiful' patients feel they are 'better', more accommodating and optimistic than the 'ugly' patients. A similar study was conducted 10 years later by Canadian scientist H.D. Hadjistavropoulos and his colleagues (Hadjistavropoulos, Ross, Von Baeyer 2005). In their study they considered the problem of the patient's perception of pain depending on the attractiveness of foreign patients. They found that physicians evaluate pain as more severe once it has been experienced by beautiful patients.

    It was noted by several authors that the phenomenon of ageism, particularly in the perception of the external appearance of another person, is the result of media representations that promote the stereotype of 'healthy, young, handsome'. M. Vorobyeva (2003) studied the features of students' perceptions of elements of the external appearance of other persons. In her paper the author discovered some differences in the nature of the preferences of students of different ages in the perception of the external appearance of another individual. This may be dictated by the fact that the adolescence standard of beauty and good looks as evaluated by individuals in their teens are often 'exaggerated and unrealistic' (Vorobyeva 2003, p. 280). In turn E.V. Belugina (1999; 2002) notices that each age phase of human development is characterized by age-specific features of the formation, functioning, and transformation of physicality, body image, dynamics, patterns of expression, ways to model the appearance. U. Teuscher and Ch. Teuscher (2007, p. 631–639) devoted their work to the double standards of ageism in the assessment of external beauty. They found that older women are more often rated as more attractive than older men regardless of the age of the subject assessment.

    Another works show the impact of mass media on perception of beauty and positive discrimination of 'beautiful', 'attractive'. S.J. Dillard (2008) analyzed how participants interpreted their own standards of attractiveness in conjunction with the ads. In another work, F. Wan, T.L. Ansons, A. Chattopadhyay, J.P. Leboe (2013) claim that exposure to idealized female images can result in negative moods, decreased body satisfaction and decreased self-assessed attractiveness, potentially leading to effects opposite to that sought by the marketer. So, in this works it is

shown that idealized images in marketing communications can be harmful for society, just because media produced stereotypes about what is beauty and ugly, and as the result media produce discriminative behavior.

However, at this stage it may be noticed that in Russian psychology there are few studies on discrimination against people in appearance, with those that are being often associated with ethnic and racial characteristics. But ageism is considered within the framework of questions on recruitment, or discrimination against older people (the problems of pensioners). In Russian studies gender discrimination is quite often studied by, for example, A.P. Pyatov (2004), V.S. Rozhkov (2006), A. Smirnov (2005) and others, but the problem of appearance, as a factor in the evaluation and practice of discrimination has not been touched upon. At the same time a number of studies on various types of discrimination based on appearance evaluation (lookism, ageism, etc.) do exist in the Russian society. Also, it should be stressed that discrimination based on outward appearance is reflected in a number of foreign works within Russian psychology but this topic is just touched upon. These works are fragmented without evaluating the phenomenon holistically. On this basis, we can talk about the relevance of research into lookism for a better understanding of the Russian reality. In our work devoted to the study of representations of women in the sense of a 'beautiful woman' we interviewed 170 women in two age groups: conventionally referred to as 'young' (85 people aged 17 to 21 years) and 'mature' (85 people aged 30 to 55 years). We have proposed a series of questionnaires, including those directly or indirectly linked to the problem of ageism and lookism.

We asked the subjects to indicate the age range ('from' and 'to') which can be attributed to a 'beautiful woman'. Respondents were presented with a scale ranging from 5 to 90 years with gradations of 5 years. In the analysis of the results we found that a beautiful woman is described as a woman between the age of 18.7 (sample average) to 55.6 years.

However, the analysis of each of the groups proved that for the young girls the age range was from 16 to 30 years, while in the 'mature' bracket this was from 20 to 60 years. This conclusion is also backed up in light of Spearman's correlation analysis, in which it was found that there is a direct correlation between age and such characteristics as the lower limit of age of a beautiful woman ($r = 0.32$; $p < 0.05$), the upper limit of age of a beautiful woman ($r = 0.21$; $p < 0.05$). Thus, the older the woman, older than those in the representation of the 'Pretty Woman', the older is her ideal of female beauty. This thesis is also confirmed by other data obtained by us. In our study we asked respondents to name the woman who is their ideal/standard of female beauty. In stipulating the ideal of a 'beautiful woman' 52 females provided us with names of famous actresses/singers.

In our study we analyzed the connection between the age of women participating in the study, the age of their 'ideal female beauty' and the age range which they attribute to a beautiful woman. In this analysis we found a direct correlation between the age of the study participants and the age of their ideal female beauty ($r = 0.5$; $p < 0.05$). We also analyzed the age of the women identified as the ideal and the age range to which the study participants used the concept of the 'Pretty Woman'. We found that only 52% of women fall into the specified range while 48% are older than the upper limit of the age of 'a beautiful woman'. It should also be noted that among these ideals the young girls named actresses, known for their roles at an

early age (Audrey Hepburn, Marilyn Monroe). Thus, we can assume that the manifestation of ageism in the women's views on female beauty is more common among young girls.

Considering lookism, as a specific, discriminatory treatment of the other, depending on their appearance, we have identified a number of issues that may somehow reflect this phenomenon. Thus, one of the sets of questions included questions about the height and weight of beautiful women. In foreign studies it is noted that people who are too short or very tall are considered less beautiful, while people of average height and weight are evaluated as more attractive. In our study we found that a beautiful woman is described as a woman of medium height from 158 to 175 centimetres, with weight ranging from 48 to 64 kilos which also reflects this trend.

We have also analyzed the responses to questions related to the numerical description of the height and weight of beautiful women. Participants of the study reported on the line: there were 2 lines – one showed weight, another height and people note/choose a section of this range of height and weight. Based on the height and weight of this 'beautiful woman', we calculated the BMI, calculated by the formula 'weight divided by height squared'. This index is interpreted in accordance with WHO recommendations. Thus, we have identified four groups of respondents: 75% of study participants indicated a ratio of height-weight which is ranked as the 'norm', 14% reported underweight, 7% – overweight and 4% noticeably underweight. Moreover, among older women 85% reported the ratio of height and weight within the 'rules' and 9% as underweight, but near normal, and 6% as overweight. At the same time, among young girls only 78% reported a normal ratio of height and weight, while 22% gave a relationship with severe deficiency or underweight. It should be noted that even those responses that belong to the 'norm' at the bottom of the range and reflect the state border must have been just – bordering on 'underweight'.

We also analyzed the answers to the question: what were necessary characteristics in the description of the figure of a beautiful woman (from the anorexic thin to obese). Thus, 45% of older women indicated that the figure of a beautiful woman was 'one shaped to look like an hourglass or a guitar', 35% chose the response 'a slim figure', 13% – sporty, 5% – a full 'body' and 2% indicated that a beautiful woman 'has a very thin figure'. Young girls picked 'slim' and 'curvy figure' (39% for each one), 12% – 'sporty figure', 3% – 'very thin' and 'full figure', and 2% 'anorexic in thinness' and 'full-size'. Thus, we can assume that young women are largely under the influence of media broadcast stereotypes about the weight of a beautiful woman and probably would discriminate against women who have a full figure. Yet, in order to talk about discrimination itself one would have to carry out additional studies.

Also, we asked five questions which were based on the foreign studies cited above. Respondents were asked to assess how this or that characteristic applies to a beautiful woman, where 1 corresponded to the answer 'absolutely not true', and 10 points to 'fully compliant'. So, we asked our subjects to rate statements such as 'Beautiful women are more happy', 'Beautiful women are more experienced because of their appearance', 'A beautiful woman has more friends', 'A beautiful woman has more enemies', 'Most beautiful women are jealous'.

The findings were as follows: 'Beautiful women are more happy' – resulted in an arithmetical average of 6.7 points, 'Beautiful women are more experienced

because of their appearance' – 6.2 points, 'Beautiful women have more friends' – 6.7 points, 'Beautiful women have more enemies' – 6.2 points, 'Most beautiful women are jealous' – 7.5 points. These results as well as the frequency distribution of the responses suggest that the majority of the survey participants believe a beautiful woman to be happier (71%) when compared with other women; beautiful women to be more experienced because of their appearance (64%), often jealous of those around them (81%), having a lot of friends (68%) and enemies (57%).

Describing the relationship of beautiful women in the workplace 1% of respondents did not answer, 11% believe that beautiful women 'are respected and do respect other people at work', 65% of respondents indicated that 'some people love them and some do not', 18% find that beautiful women 'have the same relationship with all their colleagues' and 5% of respondents believe that a beautiful woman 'is not liked by her colleagues'.

Thus, we can assume that our findings show the relevance of the topic and go in line with the Russian mentality. As V.A. Labunskaya (2010) states: 'appearance is becoming one of the most important means of building typologies, selection and recognition of certain social groups, strata, describing lifestyles. Appearance [...] becomes a way of visual communication and stratification'. Thus, appearance is a factor of discrimination.

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Współczesne zjawisko dyskryminacji ze względu na wygląd

Streszczenie

W artykule omówiono zjawisko dyskryminacji ze względu na wygląd. Zawarto teoretyczne i eksperymentalne prace rosyjskich i zagranicznych badaczy zajmujących się takimi odmianami dyskryminacji jak: lookism, ageism, dyskryminacja ze względu na wagę (weightism), dyskryminacja ze względu na wzrost i wiele innych. Większość z nich ma swoje źródła w wizerunkach prezentowanych w mass mediach. Omówienie dostarcza empirycznych dowodów do badania różnych aspektów dyskryminacji opartych na wyglądzie.