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Attractiveness privilege : the unearned advantages of physical attractivenesss

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ABSTRACT

In this theoretical investigation, I explore level of physical attractiveness as a characteristic that privileges people who are more attractive and oppresses those who are less attractive. I discuss the concept of privilege, societal standards of physical attractiveness, and the ways in which people who are more physically attractive are treated and perceived more positively by others. To examine this phenomenon more deeply, I introduce the theoretical perspectives of intersectionality and conflict theory. Intersectionality refers to the idea that different areas of privilege and oppression interact with each other in ways that create unique experiences of privilege and oppression for each individual. I use the theory of intersectionality to explain how attractiveness privilege overlaps with privilege or oppression in the areas of gender, race, social class, age, and disability status. Conflict theory, on the other hand, is the idea that inequality continues to exist because people who benefit from inequality have the power to create systems that perpetuate inequality. I use conflict theory to propose that inequality based on physical attractiveness exists because people involved in corporations within the beauty industry benefit economically from the existence of attractiveness privilege and reinforce this type of privilege through advertising. Finally, I discuss the implications of my findings about attractiveness privilege for social work practice, policy, and research.

ATTRACTIVENESS PRIVILEGE:

THE UNEARNED ADVANTAGES OF PHYSICAL ATTRACTIVENESS

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CHAPTER I

Introduction

The field of social work is dedicated to improving the lives of all people, particularly those who are vulnerable or oppressed (National Association of Social Workers, 2008). Social workers acknowledge the individual, community, and society level factors that contribute to hardship and oppression. Social workers also acknowledge that if certain groups of people are oppressed, those who do not belong to those oppressed groups experience privilege (McIntosh, 2012). Commonly recognized types of privilege include White privilege, male privilege, Christian privilege, heterosexual privilege, and class privilege (Case, Iuzzini, & Hopkins, 2012; McIntosh, 2012). By examining the areas of privilege and oppression clients occupy, social workers can gain a deeper understanding of their clients' social contexts and begin to dismantle the systems that privilege some and oppress others.

The specific aim of this thesis is to expand the literature on privilege by discussing how physical appearance privileges some and oppresses others. Numerous studies demonstrate that people who are judged as more physically attractive are consistently perceived more positively and treated more favorably than people who are considered less attractive (Dion, Berscheid, & Walster, 1972; Dion & Berschield, 1974; Hosada, Stone-Romero, & Coats, 2003; Langlois et al., 2000; Principe & Langlois, 2013). However, despite its well-documented benefits, physical attractiveness is not commonly acknowledged as an area where people are either privileged or oppressed. The purpose of the proposed research is to conceptualize physical attractiveness as a

type of privilege by exploring how people who are considered physically attractive experience unearned advantages in society. Additionally, this research will explain how and why these advantages occur using the theoretical perspectives of intersectionality and conflict theory. For the purpose of this research, I will define attractiveness privilege as unearned benefits awarded to those whose physical appearance resembles societal standards of physical attractiveness. This definition is based on the definition of gender-conforming privilege created by Case, Kanenberg, Erich, and Tittsworth (2012), which they defined as "unearned benefits awarded to those whose internal gender identity, perceived gender, and/or expressed gender matches cultural gender expectations for their assumed biological sex" (p. 147).

To conceptualize physical attractiveness as an area of privilege, I will examine it through two different theoretical perspectives. The first is intersectionality. From this perspective, I will look at how other commonly recognized types of privilege, such as race, gender, social class, age, and disability status interact with attractiveness privilege. In some cases, these areas of privilege may contribute to our idea of what attractiveness is. In other cases, attractiveness may bestow different advantages on people based on their social location within these categories. The second theoretical perspective I will use to explore attractiveness privilege is conflict theory. According to this theoretical perspective, inequality continues to occur because people with more power are able to create systems that perpetuate their privileged location in society (Resnick & Wolff, 2013; Rummel, 1977). Specifically, I will look at who benefits from attractiveness privilege and how these people may have the power to reinforce attractiveness stereotypes.

As the field of privilege studies has expanded, McIntosh (2012) has encouraged writers to be transparent about their own relation to the areas of privilege they discuss. To give the reader a sense of my social context, I want to share that I am a 23-year-old White female. I come from an

upper-middle class background and do not have any physical disabilities. Also, although people have great difficulty accurately assessing their own level of attractiveness (Pozzebon, Visser, & Bogaert, 2012), I believe there have been times in my life where I have been treated or assessed more positively based on my physical appearance. My hope is that reflecting on my own experiences of privilege and oppression will allow me to consider issues of privilege from a broader perspective, as well as provide readers with information that will allow them to consider my findings more critically.

Additionally, I want to share that I studied psychology and sociology as an undergraduate student, and I am currently finishing a master's degree in social work. I originally became interested in the topic of attractiveness privilege after taking a women and gender studies course that discussed male privilege. This class inspired me to consider how the life experience of an attractive woman in society is different from the experience of a less attractive woman or the experience of an attractive man. To me, it seems both unfair and unjust that attractive people have access to so many unearned advantages in life. I would like to raise awareness of how attractive people are privilege so we can begin to take steps that will lead to more equality in this area.

In the following chapters, I will discuss how physical attractiveness functions as an area of privilege. First, I will discuss how I plan to conceptualize and study physical attractiveness privilege through two theoretical perspectives, as well as the strengths and limitations of this plan. Then, I will describe the phenomenon of attractiveness privilege itself. This section will discuss the concept of privilege, operationalize physical attractiveness, and explore the different ways people who are more attractive experience privilege. Next, I will introduce the two theoretical lenses I plan to use to examine attractiveness privilege. Finally, I will include a

discussion of how each of these theories applies to the concept of attractiveness privilege, as well as the possible implications of this research for social work policy, education, and practice. Overall, my hope is to awareness of privilege and oppression that result from level of attractiveness, inspire social workers to consider how this issue might impact their clients' lives, and encourage everyone to take steps to create more equality in this area.

CHAPTER II

Conceptualization and Methodology

The purpose of this thesis is to explore the benefits of physical attractiveness and to establish physical attractiveness as a characteristic that privileges people in our society, much like being White or being male provides people with unearned advantages. In Chapter III, I explore the phenomenon by presenting literature on privilege, standards of physical attractiveness, and the benefits of being physically attractive. In Chapters IV and V, I present the two theoretical perspectives I apply to attractiveness privilege to explore the phenomenon more deeply. In Chapter VI, I apply each of these theories to attractiveness privilege and discuss the implications for the field of social work. Together, these chapters provide a systematic exploration of the impact of attractiveness privilege.

Theoretical Framework

To explore attractiveness privilege in more detail, I am looking at the phenomenon through the perspectives of intersectionality and conflict theory. Below, I provide a brief overview of each theory and the main concepts within each theory that I use in my discussion of attractiveness privilege.

Intersectionality. Intersectionality refers to the idea that different areas of privilege and oppression do not exist in isolation from one another; instead, they overlap and interact with each other in ways that create unique experiences of privilege and oppression for each individual (Collins, 2012; Garry, 2011; Hulko, 2009; McIntosh, 2012; MacKinnon, 2013; Miller & Garran,

2008). This theoretical perspective provides the framework for a micro-level exploration of how physical attractiveness impacts different individuals. Intersectionality is a helpful lens for examining how physical attractiveness may benefit people differently based on their race, gender, social class, age, or level of physical or cognitive ability.

My exploration of attractiveness privilege through the lens of intersectionality focuses on two major concepts of this theoretical perspective. The first is that one area of privilege or oppression can change the amount or type of privilege or oppression experienced in another area (Collins, 2012; Garry, 2011; Hulko, 2009; McIntosh, 2012; MacKinnon, 2013; Miller & Garran, 2008). For example, in Chapter VI, I explore how gender and physical attractiveness interact. The experience of a physically attractive woman is very different from the experience of a physically attractive man (Abramowitz & O'Grady, 1991; Franzoi et al., 2012; Landstedt & Gådin, 2012; Nicklin & Roch, 2008; Seidman & Miller, 2013; Straaten, Holland, Finkenauer, Hollenstein, & Engels, 2010).The second major concept I use is the idea that privilege or oppression in certain areas can impact experiences or perceptions of privilege or oppression in other areas (Miller & Garran, 2008). For example, when I will explore the interaction between race and physical attractiveness in Chapter VI, I will discuss how racism may influence our society's perceptions of who is and is not physically attractive.

Conflict theory. According to conflict theory, inequality continues to exist because people who benefit from inequality have the power to create systems that perpetuate inequality (Resnick & Wolff, 2013; Rummel, 1977; Sears & Cairns, 2010). In contrast to intersectionality, which primarily encourages a micro-level exploration of attractiveness privilege, conflict theory focuses on the bigger picture. In Chapter VI, I use conflict theory to construct an explanation for why people who are more physically attractive continue to experience privilege in our society,

even though many people consciously endorse the idea that internal qualities matter more than external ones.

Conflict theory is based in the writings of Karl Marx, who believed capitalism creates the stratification of social classes (Resnick & Wolff, 2013; Sears & Cairns, 2010). In my application of conflict theory to attractiveness privilege, I focus on how capitalism encourages attractiveness privilege. For example, many industries (e.g., the hair care, skin care, cosmetics, and clothing industries) specifically sell beauty to their consumers. If no societal benefits to being more physically attractive existed, these industries would fail to thrive, so those who run companies within these industries are motivated to perpetuate attractiveness privilege. Another important concept within conflict theory is the idea that those who benefit from inequality have the power to perpetuate it. In my discussion of conflict theory and attractiveness privilege, I argue that advertising is the mechanism used to reinforce inequality based on physical attractiveness by people who benefit financially from attractiveness privilege.

Strengths

The use of theories I chose provides a strong theoretical analysis of attractiveness privilege. Because intersectionality focuses on the experience of individuals and conflict theory looks at societal structures that contribute to inequality, the application of these two theories provides a well-rounded exploration of the privileges of being physically attractive. Additionally, both theories fit into the social justice perspective valued by the field of social work. Together, the use of these theories will raise awareness of privilege and oppression based on physical attractiveness so we can begin to discuss how to create greater equality in how people are treated based on their physical appearance.

Limitations

The use of any theoretical perspective will lend itself to certain biases, so I took steps to eliminate bias from my study as much as possible. First, many articles and studies explore how physical appearance impacts how a person is treated and perceived, so reviewing every study performed in this area is beyond the scope of this thesis project. When researching attractiveness privilege for Chapter III, I was careful to select studies that are representative of the entire body of literature instead of focusing on studies that best fit with the theoretical perspectives I chose. Additionally, when discussing how physical attractiveness intersects with other areas of privilege and oppression in Chapter VI, exploring how attractiveness intersects with *every* other area of privilege and oppression is beyond the scope of this project to. The reader may get the impression that the areas of privilege and oppression I chose to discuss are more important or more relevant than other areas when this may not actually be the case. I would like to encourage the reader to think about how physical attractiveness may interact with areas of privilege and oppression not included in my discussion.

Additionally, my educational background may have introduced some bias into my methodology. The theories I chose were drawn from my background in sociology and social work. Someone with a different educational background may have chosen different theories to explore this same phenomenon. For example, many researchers who study what makes someone physically attractive and the advantages of physical attractiveness examine this phenomenon from an evolutionary perspective. To provide a more balanced view of attractiveness privilege, I include some ideas drawn from the evolutionary perspective in my exploration of physical attractiveness in Chapter III.

Conclusion

The theories I have chosen to examine attractiveness privilege provide a detailed and balanced exploration of this phenomenon. However, before we begin to apply theory to attractiveness privilege, we need to explore the phenomenon itself. In the following chapter, I address what privilege is and who is privileged in our society. Then, I construct an argument for some objective standards of physical attractiveness, based in biology, that allow certain individuals to be consistently judged as more attractive than others. Finally, I discuss the ways in which people who are more physically attractive are treated and perceived more positively. This chapter serves as the foundation for the theoretical exploration that follows.

CHAPTER III

Attractiveness Privilege

The first step to understanding how physical attractiveness functions as a source of privilege is exploring the phenomenon itself. My conceptualization of attractiveness privilege is built on three premises:

1. Privilege exists as the natural opposite of oppression; if certain groups of people are oppressed, those not belonging to the oppressed groups must be privileged (Case et al., 2012; McIntosh, 2012; Pratto & Stewart, 2012).
2. People consistently judge certain individuals as more attractive than others based on objective standards of physical attractiveness (Agthe, Spörrle, Frey, Walper, & Maner, 2013; Fink & Neave, 2005; Langlois et al., 2000; Singh, 2004).
3. Attractive individuals are systematically perceived and treated more favorably than less attractive individuals (Benzeval, Green, & Macintyre, 2013; Dion et al., 1972; Eagly, Ashmore, Makhijani, & Longo, 1991; Langlois et al., 2000).

In this chapter, I will address these premises by exploring the bodies of literature that discuss the concept of privilege, objective standards of physical attractiveness, and the types of privileges physical attractiveness bestows on those who possess it.

Privilege

Privilege is commonly understood as unearned benefits given to people who hold more power in society based on certain statuses or characteristics (Case et al., 2012). These statuses

and characteristics include, but are not limited to, age, disability status (both physical and developmental), religion, race, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, sexual orientation, indigenous heritage, national origin, and gender (Hays, 2008). The concept of privilege was first applied to the unearned benefits of being male or being White in the 1980s (McIntosh, 2012). While studying male privilege, McIntosh (1989) began to recognize the privileges of being White, which she conceptualized as "an invisible package of unearned assets that I can count on cashing in each day, but about which I was 'meant' to remain oblivious" (p. 1). McIntosh (1989) gave several examples of these assets, including "I can go shopping alone most of the time, pretty well-assured that I will not be followed or harassed" (p. 2), "when I am told about our national heritage or 'civilization,' I am shown that people of my color made it what it is" (p. 2), "I can go into a music shop and count on finding the music of my race represented, into a supermarket and find staple foods that fit with my cultural traditions, into a hairdresser's shop and find someone who can deal with my hair," (p. 2), "I can swear, or dress in second-hand clothes, or not answer letters without having people attribute these choices to the bad morals, the poverty, or the illiteracy of my race" (p. 2), "I am never asked to speak for all the people of my racial group" (p. 2), and "I can choose blemishes in 'flesh' color that more or less match my skin" (p. 2). In other words, the benefits that come with any privileged status are powerful, but these benefits tend to be much more apparent to those who do not have them than those who do.

Because these benefits are nearly invisible to those who have them, many people do not recognize privilege as a valid perspective for looking at social inequality (McIntosh, 2012). While most people are able to recognize that certain groups are oppressed, they often view the social dominance of the non-oppressed groups as normal rather than as a privileged status (McIntosh, 1989; Pratto & Stewart, 2012). This view is evident in the language often used

discuss oppression. People often refer to groups with less social power as underprivileged, disadvantaged, or oppressed, but rarely refer to groups with more power as privileged, advantaged, or oppressive (Pratto & Stewart, 2012). Ignorance about one's own privileged status leads to "assumptions of being normal, the internalization of the feelings that one has no problems and causes no problems" (McIntosh, 2012, pp. 201-202). By recognizing privilege as well as oppression, people with more power in society can begin to use that power to dismantle the social norms and institutions that perpetuate inequality.

Pratto and Stewart (2012) have referred to identity privilege as "not having to worry about one's identity and its meaning" (p. 29). Because members of privileged groups do not have to worry about what their identity means to society, they are often less aware of their group identity than members of oppressed groups are (Case et al., 2012). To explore the phenomenon of identity privilege, Pratto and Stewart analyzed data on the sociopolitical attitudes of 3382 university students in California and New England to determine whether people belonging to oppressed groups are more aware of their group identity than those belonging to privileged groups, and whether those belonging to privileged groups are more likely than those belonging to oppressed groups to endorse beliefs that perpetuate the dominance of the privileged group. They found that people who are Black or Latino are more aware of their race than people who are White, women are more aware of their gender than men, and people who are gay, lesbian, or bisexual are more aware of their sexual orientation than people who are straight. Additionally, people who belong to a dominant group in the areas of race, gender, social class, and sexual orientation tend to score higher on measures of social dominance orientation, which is the degree to which one supports or tolerates the idea that certain social groups should be privileged over others. Pratto and Stewart also found a higher correlation of social dominance orientation and in-

group promotion for people belonging to dominant social groups. These findings are troubling because they suggest that people who have the most power to create equality are less likely to support it.

Additionally, oppressed individuals more accurately perceive privilege and oppression than those who are privileged (Croteau, Talbot, Lance, & Evans, 2002; Sears & Cairns, 2010). According to Sears and Cairns (2010), "The less powerful actually see more of the way the whole system works than the privileged, who tend to take for granted that this is the way things are" (p. 177). However, individuals who are privileged in one area but oppressed in another may be more understanding of the oppression of others (Croteau et al., 2002). For example, a Black man may be more sensitive than a White man to how sexism impacts women based on his experience of being oppressed due to his racial identity, even though oppression based on race is very different from oppression based on gender.

Although privileged individuals have difficulty recognizing their own privileges, education may improve their ability to understand the oppression of others (Hays, Chang, & Havice, 2008). To explore the relationship between White privilege and White racial identity statuses, Hays et al. (2008) asked 197 White individuals training to be counselors to complete the White Privilege Scale and the Racial Identity Attitude Scale. They found that higher levels of awareness of White privilege correlated with less oppressive racial attitudes. This finding is hopeful because it suggests that people can become more aware of their own privilege and the ways they may unintentionally oppress others if they are willing to make the effort.

Physical Attractiveness

Many people like to believe that beauty is in the eye of the beholder, meaning that physical attractiveness is subjective. However, extensive research has demonstrated that people

consistently agree about who is and is not attractive, both within and across cultures (Agthe et al., 2013; Langlois et al., 2000; Nicklin & Roch, 2008; Singh, 2004; Straaten et al., 2010). Even newborn infants are able to distinguish attractive faces from unattractive ones (Slater, Hayes, Brown, & Quinn, 2000). Slater et al. (2000) presented newborns with four pairs of faces, each containing one face rated more attractive and one rated less attractive by adults. Then, they recorded how long the infants looked at each face. The infants spent significantly more time looking at the face in each pair that had been rated more attractive by adults, which suggests that recognition of facial attractiveness is innate rather than learned.

From a biological perspective, our concept of attractiveness is closely linked to sexual reproduction (Puts et al., 2013). People likely find certain characteristics attractive because these characteristics signal health and fertility, so they seek out partners with these qualities to improve their chances of producing offspring that will survive long enough to pass on their genes (Fink & Neave, 2005). For example, physical features that people perceive as more attractive may indicate a stronger immune system and greater resistance to parasites (Fink & Neave, 2005). Because parents pass their genes to their children, seeking a partner with attractive features could increase the chance of having a child with a stronger immune system. Additionally, parents with stronger immune systems would be more likely to survive long enough to raise their children to adulthood. In this section, I will discuss the characteristics that consistently lead to higher attractiveness ratings and provide explanations for why these characteristics may indicate greater health and fertility.

Hormone levels and fertility. Hormones are substances produced in the body that regulate cell activity and body development (Merriam-Webster's online dictionary, 2013). Two sex hormones, testosterone and estrogen, play important roles in male and female fertility and

sexual development (Fink & Neave, 2005). These hormones guide the development of physical characteristics that distinguish men from women. Levels of testosterone and estrogen that indicate greater health and fertility will generally lead to the development of physical characteristics that are considered more attractive (Fink & Neave, 2005). For example, high cheekbones, smooth skin, and other feminine characteristics improve attractiveness ratings for women (Fink & Neave, 2005; Kóscinski, 2012) and these characteristics develop when a woman has a high ratio of estrogen to testosterone (Fink & Neave, 2005). This high ratio of estrogen to testosterone also correlates with greater fertility in women, so these characteristics are a visible sign that a woman has a higher chance of producing healthy offspring (Fink & Neave, 2005). Similarly, higher levels of testosterone influence the development of broad chins and defined brow bones considered attractive in men (Fink & Neave, 2005). These features also indicate male dominance, which could enhance the likelihood of the survival of offspring (Fink & Neave, 2005).

Wells, Baguley, Sergeant, and Dunn (2013) conducted a study demonstrating that facial attractiveness and voice attractiveness are both predictors of overall attractiveness. In their study, 30 men and 30 women rated the attractiveness of 40 other-sex faces, voices, and face-voice composites on a scale of 1 to 9, with higher score indicating greater attractiveness. The researchers also analyzed the level of masculinity in male faces and the level of femininity in female faces using a formula based on facial proportions. For men, face and voice attractiveness ratings both strongly predicted overall attractiveness rating. Also, a positive relationship existed between masculinity ratings based on facial masculinity measurements and attractiveness ratings for men. For women, facial attractiveness and voice attractiveness both predicted overall attractiveness ratings, although facial attractiveness had a much larger predictive effect. The

interaction between facial and vocal attractiveness also strongly predicted overall attractiveness. Since testosterone and estrogen influence the development of facial features and voices, the fact that ratings of vocal attractiveness can predict overall attractiveness supports the idea that hormones play a role in physical attractiveness.

Additionally, as hormone levels change throughout a woman's menstrual cycle, her perceived level of attractiveness also changes (Puts et al., 2013). Puts et al. (2013) collected saliva samples from 202 women at two points during their menstrual cycles: once within one day of the peak estradiol level and once within two days of peak progesterone level. During each of the appointments, the researchers also took facial photographs and voice recordings of the women. Men rated the images and voices of the women as more attractive on the days the saliva analysis indicated the women had high levels of estradiol and low levels of progesterone. These hormone levels correspond to the time in the menstrual cycle when the woman is most likely to conceive a child. This finding demonstrates that physical attractiveness in women is connected to fertility. It also demonstrates that hormone levels mediate this connection, since a high ratio of estradiol to progesterone correlated with higher levels of both attractiveness and fertility.

Health. Certain physical characteristics may be considered more attractive because they indicate health. Kóscinski (2012) photographed the hands and faces of 130 women and 138 men to explore whether hand attractiveness correlates with skin attractiveness. They found that perceived skin health increased attractiveness ratings for facial photographs of both men and women, and for photographs of women's hands. However, this study used only White models and participants, which may limit its applicability to non-White populations. Coloration and texture of the skin provide cues to health and fertility, and thus impact perceptions of attractiveness (Samson, Fink, & Matts, 2010). Whitehead, Re, Xiao, Ozakinci, and Perrett (2012)

found that nutrition can impact perceptions of skin health and attractiveness. In their study, participants who increased their fruit and vegetable intake by about three servings per day over a six-week period were rated healthier and more attractive. Additionally, physical attractiveness may be a sign of physical fitness (Hönekopp, Bartholomé, & Jansen, 2004). Hönekopp et al. (2004) photographed the faces of 77 women and asked them to complete a physical fitness test. They found that women whose faces men rated as more attractive generally performed better on the fitness test. These findings suggest that level of attractiveness may be a strong predictor of an individual's health.

Age. Female attractiveness is closely linked to age, since age is a strong indicator of fertility (Fink & Neave, 2005). Kwart, Foulsham, and Kingstone (2012) asked participants to guess the age and rate the attractiveness of 128 face images. They found that participants rated the younger faces rated as more attractive. Additionally, participants guessed models with attractive faces were younger than the models actually were. Lynn (2009) surveyed 432 female waitresses about their physical features, self-perceived attractiveness, and amount of tips received from customers. Lynn found that age correlated negatively with self-perceived level of attractiveness. However, because this study relied on surveys administered via the internet, its results are only accurate to the extent that participants were honest about their appearance and their experiences. Mathes, Brennan, Haugen, and Rice (1985) also found that older women are rated as less attractive. However, they did not find any connection between age and physical attractiveness in men. Youth may play a more important role in female attractiveness than male attractiveness, most likely because female fertility declines with age to a greater degree than male fertility.

Facial dimensions. Facial dimensions generally have a greater impact than body dimensions on overall ratings of physical attractiveness for both men and women (Currie & Little, 2009; Furnham, 2006). Faces with certain proportions consistently rate as more attractive than others (Fan, Chau, Wan, Zhai, & Lau, 2012; Kóscinski, 2012), and both the size and the placement of facial features impact attractiveness ratings (Fink & Neave, 2005; Furnham, 2006; Kóscinski, 2012; Pallet, Link, & King, 2010; Zhang, Zhao, & Chen, 2011). One of the strongest predictors of facial attractiveness is geometrical averageness, which is the degree to which a face matches the average size and placement of facial features (Fink & Neave, 2005; Kóscinski, 2012; Zhang et al., 2011). People generally rate composite images of faces as more attractive than the individual faces used to create the composites, and composites created with more faces tend to be more attractive than composites created with fewer faces (Little & Hancock, 2002). In another study, Zhang et al. (2011) used computer imaging to alter faces to be closer to or further from a geometrically average face. Of the three faces, participants consistently rated the face with features altered to be closer to average as more attractive than the original face or the face modified to be farther from average, especially for faces with features that were far from average to begin with. This study used all Chinese models and participants, so the results may be less generalizable to non-Chinese populations.

However, although faces closer to average are generally more attractive than faces that are not, faces that deviate from average in specific ways may be the most attractive (Fink & Neave, 2005). Females with smaller jaws, larger eyes, and fuller lips are considered more attractive than females with geometrically average features (Fink & Neave, 2005). In men, more pronounced cheekbones and eyebrow ridges improved attractiveness ratings (Fink & Neave, 2005).

Other aspects of the face also contribute to attractiveness ratings. Furnham (2006) found that participants rated images of female faces as more attractive when the faces were altered to have smaller noses, larger eyes, and larger lips. Additionally, in both men and women, slimmer faces are generally considered more attractive than faces with more fat tissue (Kóscinski, 2012). Another important contributor to ratings of attractiveness is facial symmetry, with more symmetrical faces consistently rating as more attractive that less symmetrical faces (Fink & Neave, 2005). Finally, the distance between features impacts facial beauty (Pallett et al., 2010). Pallett at al. (2010) found that faces were rated most attractive when they were altered so that the distance between the eyes and the mouth was 36% of the length of the face and the distance between the pupils of the eyes was 46% of the width of the face. These ratios match those of an average face, making this finding consistent with research showing that geometrical averageness is attractive (Pallett et al., 2010).

Additionally, facial expression can impact perceptions of attractiveness (Kóscinski, 2012; Morrison, Morris, & Bard, 2013). Morrison et al. (2013) asked 128 men and women to rate the attractiveness of pictures of 14 men and 16 women displaying anger, disgust, fear, happiness, sadness, surprise, or a neutral expression. Participants consistently rated the pictures as more attractive when the models displayed a happy or neutral expression. Kóscinski (2012) also found that higher ratings of mouth positivity correlated with higher ratings of model attractiveness in images of men and women. However, although facial expression impacts attractiveness ratings, Morrison et al. (2013) determined that the model's physical features were more than twice as important as the model's expression in the model's overall attractiveness rating.

Body dimensions. The size and shape of a person's body can also influence physical attractiveness (Fisher & Voracek, 2005; Lynn, 2009; Singh, 2004). People agree across cultures

about which female body shapes are most attractive, as determined by body weight and waist-to-hip ratio (Singh, 2004). Waist-to-hip ratio is calculated by dividing the circumference of the narrowest part of the hips by the circumference of the widest part of the hips (Singh, 2004). For example, if a woman's waist measurement was 27 inches and her hip measurement was 36 inches, her waist-to-hip ratio would be 0.75. Singh (2004) asked 187 adults from the Azore Islands and Guinea-Bissau to judge the attractiveness of twelve drawings of women, with three levels of body weight (underweight, normal weight, or over weight) and four levels of waist-to-hip ratios (0.7, 0.8, 0.9, and 1). They found that normal weight and underweight drawings with lower waist-to-hip ratios were judged as the most attractive. However, attractiveness ratings in this study were based on drawings. People may judge actual photographs of women's bodies differently than they judge drawings. Also women with a lower waist-to-hip ratio and a lower body mass index rated themselves as more attractive (Lynn, 2009). Curvaceousness, which takes into account both waist-to-hip ratios and waist-to-bust ratios, may also play a role in judgements of female beauty (Fisher & Voracek, 2005). Women with larger busts perceived themselves as more attractive than women with smaller breasts (Lynn, 2009). In general, women with an hourglass shape, meaning a larger bust and hips and a smaller waist, are considered the most attractive (Fisher & Voracek, 2005). From a biological perspective, women with this body shape are viewed as more attractive because waist-to-hip ratio is a reliable indicator of fertility (Singh & Singh, 2011).

For men, body weight and muscularity are the most important predictors of male attractiveness (Dixson, Dixson, Bishop, & Parish, 2010; Swami & Tovée, 2008). Dixson et al. (2010) asked 266 women to rate the attractiveness of male drawings with varying body types pictured from behind. Women rated the most muscular body type as most attractive. Women also

rated figures with a normal body size as more attractive than figures that were very thin or overweight. Swami and Tovée (2008) studied male perceptions of male body attractiveness. They found that a low waist-to-chest ratio was the strongest predictor of body attractiveness. Body mass index was also a strong predictor of body attractiveness, with men who had a body mass index of about 21 receiving the highest attractiveness ratings.

Effort. Finally, people may be able to improve their perceived level of attractiveness through effort. Kóscinski (2012) found that the use of makeup enhanced attractiveness ratings for faces and grooming of nails increased attractiveness ratings of hands. Cash, Dawson, Davis, Bowen, and Galumbeck (1989) photographed 38 women with and without make-up to determine whether the presence of make-up altered attractiveness ratings. They also found that men rated women as more attractive when the women were photographed wearing makeup. Also, since body type is a predictor of attractiveness, both men and women could presumably alter their level of attractiveness through diet and exercise. However, many characteristics that improve ratings of attractiveness, such as facial structure, would be nearly impossible to alter without cosmetic surgery.

Limitations. Many researchers have studied what makes someone physically attractive. However, a major limitation of this body of research is that certain populations have been studied more than others. For example, many studies of physical attractiveness focus solely on female beauty. Not only does the lack of research on male attractiveness make it difficult to establish standards of male beauty, but it also supports the idea that women are valued mainly for their physical appearance. Additionally, many of the studies discussed used samples of images and participants that were mostly or entirely White. Using primarily White participants and images in studies of physical attractiveness is problematic because it makes the findings less generalizable

to people of color, even though some researchers believe that the same beauty standards apply to people of all races (Fink & Neave, 2005). Focusing on White people in studies of attractiveness also reinforces the idea that Whiteness is equated with attractiveness, which contributes to the ongoing oppression of people of color.

Another limitation is that studies exploring which characteristics are more attractive sometimes produce conflicting results. This could be due to methodological differences or errors, but it could also suggest that standards of attractiveness are not completely objective. However, even if physical attractiveness is a social construction instead of an objective reality based in biology, people exhibit a high level of agreement about who is attractive and who is not (Agthe et al., 2013; Langlois et al., 2000; Singh, 2004). It may not be possible to say definitively why some people are considered more attractive than others, but the fact remains that certain individuals are judged as attractive more often than others, and this influences the way they are perceived and treated.

Privileges of Physical Attractiveness

Although many people like to believe that people are judged based on internal traits such as kindness and intelligence, physical attractiveness greatly impacts how people are treated and perceived (Langlois et al., 2000). In a meta-analysis of 919 studies addressing the benefits of physical attractiveness, Langlois et al. (2000) found that attractiveness privilege occurs for both men and women, for both children and adults, and with both with strangers and with people we know personally. The benefits of attractiveness are also very broad. Attractiveness impacts judgments of academic ability (Langlois et al., 2000), occupational ability (Dion et al., 1972; Langlois et al., 2000), and social skills (Dion et al., 1972; Eagly et al., 1991, Langlois et al., 2000). Preferential treatment of people who are more physically attractive often translates to

better life outcomes (Benzeval et al., 2013). In childhood, children rated as more attractive tend to be more popular, be better adjusted, score higher on tests of intelligence, and perform better in school (Langlois et al., 2000). As adults, higher levels of attractiveness correlate with greater success in the workplace, being better liked, more dating experience, more sexual experience, greater health both physically and mentally, higher levels of extraversion, higher levels of confidence, higher levels of self-esteem, more positive self-perceptions, and better social skills (Langlois et al., 2000).

So much research has been performed to study the benefits of physical attractiveness that researchers have compiled the results into meta-analyses (Dion et al., 1972; Eagly et al., 1991; Langlois et al., 2000). Researchers perform meta-analyses to synthesize research on a specific topic by statistically combining the results of studies, looking at the overall trends in the results, and determining the strength of trends based on effect sizes (Shlonsky, Noonan, Little, & Montgomery, 2011). Meta-analyses can be a rich source of information on a topic because they combine the results of many studies and because researchers carefully assess studies for validity before including them (Shlonsky et al., 2010). Also, meta-analyses often include both published and unpublished studies, which reduces publication bias (Shlonsky et al., 2010). However, although meta-analyses are helpful for determining overall trends, the results provided by these analyses are less specific and nuanced than the results of individual studies. This section will look at results from both meta-analyses and individual studies to explore the privileges of physical attractiveness.

Positive perceptions. In general, people tend to judge people who are attractive more positively than they judge people who are less attractive (Dion et al., 1972; Eagly et al., 1991; Langlois et al., 2000). Dion et al. (1972) gave sixty students envelopes containing pictures of

three people of either gender: one person previously rated as attractive, one rated as average, and one rated as unattractive. They asked the students to assess the people in the photographs on five personality traits and predict which of the three people would be most and least likely to have various life experiences and engage in various occupations. They found that the students predicted attractive individuals would be more likely to have a higher status occupation, more likely to get married, be better marriage partners, and be happier socially and professionally (Dion et al., 1972). This indicates that in the absence of information beyond physical appearance, people may judge attractive people more positively.

Meta-analyses of studies exploring the benefits of attractiveness have found that attractive people are perceived more positively in a variety of areas (Eagly et al., 1991, Langlois et al., 2000). The studies reviewed by Langlois et al. (2000) found that attractive adults are judged to be more competent in the workplace, have better social skills, and be better adjusted than their less attractive peers. Eagly et al. (1991) found large effect sizes for judgments of attractive people as more socially competent, as well as moderate effect sizes for perceptions of attractive people as better adjusted and more intelligent. However, Eagly et al. (1991) also found that these effect sizes were smaller when other information was available for the individuals being rated in the studies.

Attractive children are also viewed more positively by adults and by their peers than unattractive children (Dion & Berscheid, 1974; Langlois et al., 2000; Ramsey & Langlois, 2002). Langlois et al. (2000) found that people rated attractive children more positively in areas of academic and developmental competence, adjustment, and interpersonal competence than unattractive children, even when the raters knew the children personally. Also, Dion and Berscheid (1974) asked 77 children between the ages of 4 and 7 to participate in sociometric

interviews where they were asked to choose which of their classmates best fit certain statements. They found that the children rated attractive peers as more independent, unattractive peers as scarier, unattractive male peers as more aggressive, and unattractive female peers as more fearful.

Additionally, Ramsey and Langlois (2002) performed a study exploring whether children associate positive qualities with physical attractiveness. The researchers created storybooks with two female characters: one attractive character and one unattractive character. In one version of the story, the attractive character displayed a positive personality trait and the unattractive character displayed a negative personality trait. In the other version, the unattractive character displayed a positive personality trait and the attractive character displayed a negative personality trait. After the researchers read a version of the story to a group of children, they showed the children pictures of both characters' faces and asked the children to identify which character displayed the positive trait and which one displayed the negative trait. They found that the children made more errors in identifying which character displayed which trait in the condition where the unattractive character displayed the positive personality trait. This finding suggests that children associate positive personality traits with attractiveness.

Social preference. People prefer to associate with people who are more physically attractive (Dion et al., 1972; Langlois et al., 2000; Principe & Langlois, 2013). Attractive adults have consistently been rated as more socially desirable than less attractive adults (Dion et al., 1972; Langlois et al., 2000). Additionally, attractive children rate higher on measures of social appeal than less attractive children (Langlois et al., 2000). In one study, Principe and Langlois (2013) created a scenario where children and adults were given the chance to choose partners and opponents for a tennis match in a video game. The participants chose from a selection of

video game avatars of varying levels of physical attractiveness that they were told represented real people also participating in the study. Both children and adults preferred to play with higher-attractiveness video game avatars as partners and lower-attractiveness avatars as opponents, with high-attractiveness avatars chosen as partners 62.5% of the time, medium-attractiveness avatars chosen 25% of the time, and low-attractiveness avatars chosen 12.5% of them time. This finding suggests that people prefer to associate with people who are more physically attractive, although people may make different decisions when choosing between real people rather than avatars, or when information beyond physical appearance is available.

Social preference for people who are more physically attractive is especially pronounced in potential romantic partners (Ha, Berg, Engels, & Lichtwarck-Aschoff, 2012; Langlois et al., 2000; Lee, Loewenstein, Airley, Hong, & Young, 2008; Lennon & Kenny, 2013; Singh, 2004; Straaten et al., 2010). Attractive people generally have more dating and sexual experience than people who are less attractive (Langlois et al., 2000). This may be because people, particularly men, highly value physical attractiveness in potential relationship partners (Ha et al., 2012). Singh (2004) found that drawings of bodies with a normal body weight, which were judged as the most attractive, were also judged as the most desirable for a long-term relationship. The bias towards physically attractive people also occurs in more casual romantic situations (Lee et al., 2008; Lennon & Kenny, 2013). Women reported greater willingness to have both protected and unprotected sex with more attractive male targets, even though they rated attractive targets are more likely to have a sexually transmitted infection (Lennon & Kenny, 2013). Also, Lee et al. (2008) analyzed data from HOTorNOT.com, a dating website where members rate each other's attractiveness on a scale of one to ten. They found that with every one point increase in attractiveness on the ten-point scale, likelihood that members would accept a request to meet in

person from an individual increased by 130% (Lee et al., 2008). These findings suggest that attractive individuals are generally considered more desirable partners for dating and relationships than less attractive individuals.

Favorable treatment. Attractive people are generally treated better than their less attractive peers (Hosada et al., 2003; Johnson, Podratz, Dipboye, & Gibbons, 2010; Langlois et al., 2000; Lynn, 2009). In a meta-analysis of studies exploring the benefits of physical attractiveness, Langlois et al. (2000) found that, in general, attractive adults receive more positive attention, receive more rewards (e.g., job recommendations, votes for an election, etc.), have more positive social interactions, have fewer negative social interactions, and others are more willing to help or cooperate with them. Additionally, attractive children generally receive better evaluations of competence, have fewer negative social interactions, more positive social interactions, and receive more favorable treatment than less attractive children. This meta-analysis demonstrates that the benefits of physical attractiveness occur for both adults and children, and occur within many different aspects of life.

One of the areas where the benefits of physical attractiveness are most pronounced is the workplace (Hosada et al., 2003; Johnson et al., 2010; Lynn, 2009). In general, attractive individuals are judged as more employable than people who are less attractive (Hosada et al., 2003; Johnson et al., 2010). Hosada et al. (2003) conducted a meta-analysis of 27 studies that explored the impact of physical attractiveness on job-related outcomes. They found that attractive individuals were more likely to be hired and promoted, employers predicted they would be more successful, and they received better performance evaluations. This bias toward attractive people occurred for both men and women, and it occurred even when additional information related to the individual's competence as an employee was available for the

individuals. Additionally, Johnson et al. (2010) found that attractive women were considered more suitable than unattractive women for both stereotypically masculine and stereotypically feminine jobs. Finally, Lynn (2009) found that waitresses who reported a lower body mass index, lower waist-to-hip ratio, or larger breast size, all of which may increase physical attractiveness, reported receiving higher tips from customers. Over time, favorable treatment in the workplace may increase an attractive person's likelihood of becoming wealthy and successful (Benzeval et al., 2013; Langlois et al., 2000).

Physical attractiveness even impacts decisions about political elections (Hart, Ottati, & Krumdick, 2011; Rosar, Klein, & Beckers, 2012). Rosar et al. (2012) analyzed the results of the 2009 North Rhine-Wesphalia elections for mayor and found that voters favored attractive candidates. Hart et al. (2011) also conducted a study to determine whether attractiveness impacts the outcomes of elections. They provided participants with a packet containing a photograph of an attractive or unattractive candidate and information about his political views, and then asked the participants to evaluate how positively they viewed the candidate. They found that people who were less knowledgeable about politics favored the more attractive candidate, whereas people who were more knowledgeable favored the less attractive candidate. However, when they increased the cognitive load of the participants by asking them to rehearse an eight-digit number while they reviewed the candidate's information, all participants favored the more attractive candidate, regardless of their level of political knowledge. This shows that under certain conditions, physical attractiveness is an advantage in elections.

Positive life outcomes. Perhaps because people are more likely to treat and perceive attractive people positively, people who are attractive may have better life outcomes than those who are less attractive. Benzeval et al. (2013) examined data from 1515 participants of the Youth

Cohort Study to see if individuals rated more attractive at age 15 had better life outcomes at age 36. They found that participants who were rated more attractive at 15 generally had higher IQs as adults. Additionally, at age 15, participants rated more attractive had a higher socioeconomic status than their less attractive peers. They also had a higher socioeconomic status at age 36, even when the researchers controlled for other variables, such as socioeconomic status at age 15. Jaeger (2011) found that taller men earned more money than shorter men across their careers, and women with low BMIs or attractive faces had a higher socioeconomic status later in life than women with higher BMIs or less attractive faces. Attractive adults also tend to have better physical and mental health (Langlois et al., 2000). These findings show that people rated more attractive ultimately have better life outcomes in a variety of areas, although they d0 not explain why this phenomenon occurs.

Drawbacks of physical attractiveness. The studies presented in this section have focused on the benefits of physical attractiveness. However, people may occasionally stereotype attractive people negatively (Dion et al., 1972; Eagly et al., 1991). For example, Dion el al. (1972) found that attractive people were perceived to be worse parents than less attractive people, and Eagly et al. (1991) found that attractive individuals were thought to be more vain and less modest. Lennon and Kenny (2013) found that women perceived attractive men as more likely to have an STI, although this did not diminish their willingness to engage in protected or unprotected sex with these men. These findings show that certain negative characteristics may be more likely to be attributed to attractive individuals, regardless of whether the individuals actually have these characteristics.

Attractive people, especially attractive women, may also sometimes be treated negatively based on their appearance. Agthe et al. (2013) asked 4934 children and adolescents to read a

short narrative about a successful student with a picture of an attractive or unattractive individual representing the student. Then, participants completed an attribution measure which asked them to judge how much of the students success could be attributed to ability and how much resulted from luck. Participants who had reached puberty showed a greater tendency to attribute the success of attractive students to luck rather than ability (Agthe et al., 2013). Also, Johnson et al. (2010) found that attractive women applying for stereotypically masculine jobs where physical appearance was not important (e.g., truck driver) were viewed as less suitable for the job than less attractive women. Finally, in Phillips and Hranek's (2011) study of participants' willingness to forgive someone based on that person's gender and level of attractiveness, female participants were less likely to forgive an attractive woman than a less attractive woman for a minor transgression. They also viewed the same apology as less sincere when offered by the more attractive woman.

However, overall, the disadvantages of being physically attractive are limited, whereas the advantages of attractiveness are pervasive. Based on the research, the benefits of being physically attractive seem to far outweigh the occasional drawbacks. The preferential treatment of attractive individuals in our society is highly unfair, since physical attractiveness is generally something people are born with rather than something people achieve. This systematic preference for attractive individuals of all ages and in many different areas of life should be recognized as an instance of privilege so we can begin to create greater equality for everyone, regardless of their physical appearance.

CHAPTER IV

Intersectionality

Intersectionality is a theoretical perspective that can be used to describe and explain how overlapping areas of privilege and oppression create a unique experience for every individual (Collins, 2012; Garry, 2011; Hulko, 2009; McIntosh, 2012; MacKinnon, 2013; Miller & Garran, 2008). Collins (2012) provided a succinct definition of the concept:

> Systems of power (such as race, gender, class, sexuality, ability, age, country of origin, citizenship status, etc.) cannot be understood in isolation from one another; instead, systems of power intersect and co-produce one another to result in unequal material realities, the distinctive social experiences that characterize them, and intersecting belief systems that construct and legitimate these social arrangements. (p. 455)

In other words, the privilege and oppression experienced by a White lesbian woman will look very different from the privilege and oppression experienced by a gay Latino man, even though both individuals hold one privileged status and two oppressed statuses in the areas of race, gender, and sexual orientation. Moreover, the societal norms, belief systems, and institutions that create and reinforce privilege and oppression constantly influence each other.

History

The concept of intersectionality emerged during the American feminist movement of the 1960s and 1970s (Collins, 2012; Garry, 2011; Lutz, Herrera Vivar, & Supik, 2011). When people look at discrimination, they have an innate tendency to focus of the privileged members of a

disadvantaged group (Lutz et al., 2011). For example, people may be more inclined to focus on the sexism experienced by White women rather than Black women, or the racism experienced by Black men rather than Black women. Accordingly, early feminism focused mainly on improving the social location of middle class White women, while largely ignoring the unique oppression experienced by women of color (Garry, 2011). Black women, along with other women of color, started a movement to address the overlapping systems of oppression they experienced due to their statuses as women and as people of color (Collins, 2012). This movement raised awareness about how overlapping inequalities impact experiences of oppression, opened up a new discussion about privilege, and shifted more attention toward people who are oppressed in multiple areas (Lutz et al., 2011).

Overview

Intersectionality has evolved to address not just the experiences of women of color, but any set of interlocking oppressions (Hulko, 2009). Intersectionality is based on the idea that "social inequalities are multiple, complex, and mutually constructing" (Collins, 2012, p. 455). As Garry (2011) explained,

> Oppression and privilege by race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, class, nationality, and so on do not act independently of each other in our individual lives or in our social structures; instead, each kind of oppression or privilege is shaped by and works through the others. These compounded, intermeshed systems of oppression and privilege in our social structures help to produce (a) our social relations, (b) our experiences of our own identity, and (c) the limitations of shared interests even among members of "the same" oppressed or privileged group. (p. 827)

In other words, understanding oppression through the lens of intersectionality requires more than just adding the effects of different types of oppression together (MacKinnon, 2013). People have unique experiences of oppression based on their specific social location.

Interaction of Oppressed Statuses

Intersectionality can also refer to "an active system with both positive and negative feedback effects, non-linearity of relations, and non-nested, non-hierarchical overlaps among institutions" (Lutz et al., 2011, p. 56). Different areas of privilege and oppression sometimes reinforce each other through stereotypes. For example, in our society, race and social class overlap significantly (Miller & Garran, 2008). Although less wealthy people can be White and middle class people of color still experience oppression, people of color are more likely to have a lower socioeconomic status than people who are White. Furthermore, overcoming both racial discrimination and class discrimination is incredibly difficult for people of color who are less wealthy. In our society, racism and classism reinforce each other through residential segregation, access to education, interest rates on loans, and other institutional factors. Racism makes it harder for people to change their social class, which reinforces classist stereotypes based on race.

Additionally, the oppression experienced by an individual with multiple oppressed statuses is not necessarily equal to the oppression of one status plus the oppression of the other status (Garry, 2011). A Black woman living in the United States will not just experience the effects of racism plus the effects of sexism; she will also experience oppression that is unique to her status as a Black woman. For example, Black women in the United States are sexualized in a way that Black men, White women, and other women of color are not (Garry, 2011). Additionally, people with multiple oppressed identities may have more difficulty feeling a sense of belonging (Garry, 2011). For example, a gay Latino man may experience homophobia within

the Latino community and racism within the gay community, leading to a sense of isolation not experience by someone with only one of these oppressed statuses.

People and organizations may also discriminate against people belonging to a specific combination of oppressed statuses (MacKinnon, 2013). In the case of DeGraffenreid v. General Motors, five Black women accused General Motors of engaging in hiring practices that discriminated against Black women (Lutz et al., 2011). They did not win the case because General Motors hired White women, so in the view of the court, discrimination based on sex could not have occurred. "The court's refusal in *DeGraffenreid* to acknowledge that Black women encounter combined race and sex discrimination implies that the boundaries of sex and race discrimination doctrine are defined respectively by White women's and Black men's experiences" (Lutz et al., 2011, p. 28). If an employer claims that he is not racist because he hires Black men and not sexist because he hires White women, but he refuses to hire Black women, he is still discriminating against potential employees based on race and gender (MacKinnon, 2013). The use of intersectionality captures types of discrimination that may not be noticed if we only pay attention to discrimination based on one status.

Interaction of Oppressed and Privileged Statuses

Intersectionality is also a helpful lens for understanding how areas of oppression may interact with areas of privilege. McIntosh (2012) explained that we all experience both privilege and oppression in various areas of our lives:

> As I conceive it, there is a hypothetical horizontal line of social justice, parallel to the floor or the ground. Below this line, people are pushed down, suppressed, discouraged, mistreated, tortured, and may be victims of genocide. Above the hypothetical line of justice, individuals or groups are lifted up, encouraged, respected, given the benefit of the

> doubt, and awarded power. I believe that each of us has experience both above and below the line depending on many, many variables, including but not limited to such arbitrary circumstances as our parents' relation to the United States and to educational institutions, our own nation of origin, our language of origin, the neighborhoods we grew up in, our parent's or parents' income, parents' religion, histories, geographic regions, economic class, social class, gender, ethnicity, gender identity, sexual orientation, body types, hair, complexions, physical ability, handedness, etc. (p. 197)

In some cases, experiencing privilege in one area may alter or mediate the experience of oppression in another area. For example, an upper-middle class Black man will likely experience racial oppression very differently from a working class Black woman due to the privilege he experiences in the areas of gender and social class. Using the perspective of intersectionality helps us consider both the privileges and oppressions experienced by an individual based on the individual's social location to create a more complete picture of the individual's experience in society.

Holding a privileged status can impact how people view their oppressed statuses, as well as how others view their oppressed statuses. Croteau et al. (2002) conducted a study to explore how privilege and oppression interact. They interviewed 18 participants who held at least one privileged and one oppressed status in the areas of race, gender, sexual orientation, socioeconomic status, and disability status to explore the participants' experiences of privilege and oppression. Overall, participants had difficulty describing the interplay between their privileged and oppressed statuses. However, the researchers did uncover some patterns in the participants' responses. Participants reported that privileged statuses generally reduced the effects of oppression, impacted their ability to recognize their own oppression, and impacted the

ability of others to recognize the individual as part of an oppressed group. For example, people of color with a higher socioeconomic status or education level reported that other people of color felt like they were selling out or no longer recognized them as being oppressed. Additionally, African American participants felt that their racial oppression overshadowed their privilege in other areas. In contrast, lesbian, bisexual, and gay participants felt like having a higher educational or socioeconomic status lessened their experience of oppression. These findings provide a glimpse into how different areas of privilege and oppression can come together to create unique experiences for the individual.

Social Context

Social context can also alter the experience of an individual by altering the meaning people attach to the characteristics that privilege or oppress the individual. For example, Hulko (2009) explained that being in her late 30s privileges her in most contexts, but becomes a disadvantage in the academic setting where she works. Additionally, she explained that as a bisexual woman, she was able to experience straight privilege when she was in a committed relationship with a man, but not when she was in a committed relationship with a woman. People may also experience oppression due to their race or nationality in certain parts of the world, but experience privilege for having that same identity in different parts of the world (Hulko, 2009). Additionally, racial categories vary based on where you are in the world; for example, someone with a mixed racial background may be considered Black in Canada but not in Trinidad (Hulko, 2009). Privilege and oppression always need to be considered within the social context of the individual.

Importance of Self-Awareness

The study of intersectionality is closely linked to the concepts of inequality, power, and politics (Collins, 2012). Van Herk, Smith, and Andrew (2011) recommended that intersectionality be addressed at the levels of individual practice, research, education, and policy. However, self-awareness about one's own experiences of privilege and oppression is a good place to start (Garry, 2011; Hulko, 2009). Self-awareness of one's own overlapping areas of privilege and oppression can help raise awareness about privileged statuses (Garry, 2011). For example, White people who become more aware of privilege and oppression may begin to see themselves as White instead of failing to view race as part of their social context. People working in industries where they provide direct services to clients should pay careful attention to their own social locations and the social locations of those they work with so they can consider how privilege and oppression might shape interactions (Van Herk et al., 2011).

Conclusion

As discussed in the previous chapter, physical attractiveness functions as an area of privilege in our society. However, privilege and oppression based on level of physical attractiveness do not occur in isolation from other areas of privilege and oppression. In Chapter VI, I discuss how physical attractiveness interacts with race, gender, social class, age, and disability status. In the following chapter, I introduce the second theoretical perspective I use in my discussion of attractiveness privilege: conflict theory.

CHAPTER V

Conflict Theory

Conflict theory is "a theoretical perspective that sees ongoing conflict between dominant and subordinate groups as a crucial characteristic of societies based on inequality" (Sears & Cairns, 2010, p. 184). The writings of Karl Marx form the foundation of conflict theory. Marx believed that capitalism structures society in a way that advantages some people at the expense of others, which leads to conflict between social classes with conflicting interests (Marx & Engels, 2013). Marx explained,

> The history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles. Freeman and slave, patrician and plebian, lord and serf, guild-master and journeyman, in a word, oppressor and oppressed, stood in constant opposition to one another, carried on an uninterrupted, now hidden, now open fight, a fight that each time ended, either in a revolutionary reconstitution of society at large, or in the common ruin of the contending classes. (p. 3)

Marx believed social inequality would ultimately lead to a revolution where the people with less power in society would come together to overthrow the people with more power (Marx & Engels, 1848/2013; Sears & Cairns, 2010). Many scholars now reject Marx's idea of a revolution, but his theory of capitalism and class struggle remains a popular perspective for explaining the causes and consequences of social inequality.

Historical Context

Conflict theory emerged in Europe during the mid-1800s, when Karl Marx began publishing books that discussed the social and political dynamics of Western society. Prior to the 1800s, Europeans started colonizing other countries and trading goods globally (Marx & Engels, 1848/2013). This pattern of colonization and trade led to a shift in Europe's economic structure. Marx explained,

> The bourgeoisie, wherever it has got the upper hand, has put an end to all feudal, patriarchal, idyllic relations. It has pitilessly torn asunder the motley feudal ties that bound man to his "natural superiors," and has left remaining no other nexus between man and man than naked self-interest, than callous "cash payment." (p. 6)

By the 1800s, social position was no longer determined by access to land, but by access to money. Scholars such as Marx started to see inequality as a function of the capitalist economic structure. Over time, conflict theory evolved to include all theoretical perspectives that view inequality through the lens of power differentials between those who have access to political, social, and economic resources and those who do not. Conflict theory experienced a surge in popularity in the 1960s, during the emergence political movements aimed at creating greater equality for oppressed populations (Sears & Cairns, 2010).

Overview

Conflict theory is a sociological perspective that originated in the writings of Karl Marx. Marx believed that capitalism causes an unequal distribution of wealth and income, which leads to the division of society into social classes with conflicting interests (Resnick & Wolff, 2013; Sears & Cairns, 2010). Marx defined social class in terms of property ownership (Rummel, 1977). According to Marx, society has two main social classes: the bourgeoisie, who own

property and earn income through company profits, and the proletariat, who do not own property and earn income by working for wages. The bourgeoisie have the power to use their property for their own benefit and to exclude others from using it, which improves their class position within society (Rummel, 1977).

Ownership of property also gives this ruling class the power to exploit the working class, justify the distribution of resources, and justify their own use of power (Resnick & Wolff, 2013; Rummel, 1977). Therefore, the ruling class has the ability to perpetuate their privileged social standing. Over time, inequality becomes ingrained in the systems that make up society, such as businesses, educational systems, and the government (Sears & Cairns, 2010). According to Sears and Cairns,

> The state, in this conflict model, does not serve the interests of all by defending social order against chaos but rather acts on behalf of the most powerful by protecting a particular inequitable order against the claims of the disadvantaged. The state might appear to be a neutral referee as contending interest groups stake their claims on a level playing field, but according to the conflict model the rules of the game favor the powerful every time. (p. 22)

Over time, society's norms and values begin to legitimize and perpetuate inequality. For example, the American narrative of rags to riches overlooks the fact that most of the people in positions of power were born with significant financial and social advantages (Sears & Cairns, 2010). Overall, from the conflict perspective, the organization of society inherently privileges people who are already powerful and disadvantages everyone else.

The writings of C. Wright Mills also contributed to the earliest model of conflict theory. Mills (1956) believed a small group of people with economic and political power, whom he

referred to as the power elite, held the power to make most of the important decisions that impacted every citizen of the United States. Mills explained,

> The power elite is composed of men whose positions enable them to transcend the ordinary environments of ordinary men and women; they are in positions to make decisions having major consequences. … For they are in command of the major hierarchies and organizations of modern society. They rule the big corporations. They run the machinery of the state and claim its prerogatives. They direct the military establishment. They occupy the strategic command posts of the social structure, in which are now centered effective means of the power and the wealth and the celebrity which they enjoy." (pp. 3-4)

In modern days, Mills' power elite might refer to powerful politicians, chief executive officers of large corporations, and even celebrities, all of whom have the power to influence policies and social norms that have consequences for everyone.

Applications to the Field of Social Work

Researchers within the field of social work have used conflict theory to examine how financial pressures can contribute to oppression (Fogler, 2009). For example, Fogler (2009) used the conflict perspective to examine how the competing interests of government policies and the for-profit nursing home industry might impact the effectiveness of discharge planning services for nursing home patients. From this perspective, for-profit health care organizations create policies that maximize their financial benefits, even though these policies may conflict with what is best for patients. These policies will ultimately shape the decisions healthcare social workers make about patients, leading to compromised care for patients in order to improve financial outcomes for the organization (Fogler, 2009).

Scholars have also used conflict theory to explain the dynamics of social movements. Nilsen (2009) identified two types of social movements, which he referred to as social movements from above and social movements from below, that can be explained by Marxist principles. Social movements from above occur when social groups that already hold economic or political power use that power to maintain or advance their interests. In contrast, social movements from below occur when people with less power challenge the societal structures that cause their oppression in order to gain access to more power or resources. Both types of social movements can effectively lead to societal change that benefits the social group leading the movement.

Social Change

Conflict theory is a powerful tool for critically examining social inequality because it offers a solution to inequality. Mills (1959) believed the individual has the power to create social change. He explained,

> We have come to know that every individual lives, from one generation to the next, in some society; that he lives out a biography, and that he lives it out within some historical sequence. By the fact of his living he contributes, however minutely, to the shaping of this society and to the course of its history, even as he is made by society and by its historical push and shove. (p. 6)

Although social structures shape the behavior of individual people, individual people also have the power to shape social structures by recognizing the historical patterns that have led to inequality and by taking small steps toward creating a future that will create greater equality (Mills, 1959).

Karl Marx suggested an even more radical solution to inequality. According to Marx, the competing interests of people with more and less power within society will lead to conflict, which will create change in the social and political structure of society (Marx & Engels, 1848/2013). Although the revolution Marx predicted has yet to occur, it may be possible to reduce oppression on the individual level by creating government structures, economic structures, and social policies that create greater social equality (Spector, 2002). Movement toward greater equality happens when people come together to form unions, protest injustice, or challenge racism, sexism, or other forms of oppression during interpersonal interactions.

Conclusion

The economic structure of the United States undoubtedly privileges some and oppresses others. Furthermore, capitalism perpetuates privilege and oppression because those with more power have the ability to structure society to benefit themselves. While this idea is obviously true for privilege based on social class, I believe it may also be true for privilege based on physical attractiveness. In the following chapter, I will discuss how the capitalist economy of the United States encourages attractiveness privilege and shapes our idea of who should be considered attractive. I will also offer some suggestions of how we can begin working towards overcoming oppression based on physical appearance.

CHAPTER VI

Discussion

This final chapter brings together all of the ideas and information discussed in the previous chapters. First, I apply intersectionality and conflict theory to attractiveness privilege to provide a deeper understanding of the phenomenon. Then, I discuss the importance for people working within the field of social work to recognize physical attractiveness as a source of privilege. I explore how physical attractiveness impacts therapeutic relationships, discuss how physical attractiveness may impact clients' presenting concerns, share ideas for dismantling attractiveness privilege through individual action and policy changes, and discuss the implications of my findings for future research.

Intersectionality

As discussed in Chapter IV, intersectionality theorists look at how different areas of privilege and oppression overlap to create a unique experience for each individual. In this section, I explore how attractiveness privilege may impact privilege and oppression based on gender, race, socioeconomic status, age, and disability status.

Physical attractiveness and gender. Although physical attractiveness is generally an advantage, the impact of physical attractiveness varies based on gender. The experience of a physically attractive woman is different from the experience of a physically attractive man, and the same is true for less attractive women and men (Abramowitz & O'Grady, 1991; Franzoi et al., 2012; Landstedt & Gådin, 2012; Nicklin & Roch, 2008; Seidman & Miller, 2013; Straaten et

al., 2010). Additionally, the gender composition of pairs can impact the effect of physical attractiveness on interactions (McColl & Truong, 2013; Saad & Gill, 2009). In other words, level of physical attractiveness will influence female-male, female-female, and male-male interactions differently.

Impact of physical attractiveness on gendered interactions. Our drive to form romantic relationships may influence the impact of physical attractiveness on social interactions. For example, McColl and Truong (2013) explored how gender and physical attractiveness influenced customer evaluations of online salespeople in sales conducted via web-video. They found that when the customer and the salesperson were of different genders, participants reported higher customer satisfaction scores for attractive salespeople. This finding suggests that in certain situations, attractiveness may have a stronger positive impact when people interact with someone of the other gender than when they interact with someone of the same gender. Participants in this study may have experienced higher levels of satisfaction under these circumstances because most people are inclined to seek romantic relationships with attractive people of the other gender. To further explore this possible explanation for the findings of this study, researchers could test whether gay or lesbian individuals report higher customer satisfaction scores when interacting with an attractive person of the same gender.

In competitions, the gender of an opponent may impact self-perceptions of attractiveness. Saad and Gill (2009) asked 123 men and 115 women to play the Ultimatum Game in female-male, female-female, or male-male pairs. In this game, the pair was given a sum of money. The first player decided how the money will be split between the pair, and the second player decided to accept or reject the first player's offer. If the second player accepted the offer, the players divided and kept the money however the first player decided to allocate it. If the second player

rejected the offer, both players walked away with nothing. During this study, the researchers also asked participants to rate their opponent's and their own level of physical attractiveness. They found that self-ratings of attractiveness in females did not vary based on their opponent's gender. Male participants, however, rated their own level of attractiveness significantly higher if their opponent was male than if their opponent was female.

Saad and Gill (2009) explained this finding from an evolutionary perspective. During our evolutionary history, men attracted romantic partners by proving their ability to provide the resources necessary for the survival of future offspring. This may explain why even today, men try to inflate their own status and lower the status of an opponent to improve their chances of accessing resources when resources are at stake. Since women primarily attracted partners by appearing to be able to produce healthy offspring, they do not experience the same tendency to inflate their own status or lower the status of others when competing for resources during modern times.

Stronger impact of physical attractiveness on women. Physical attractiveness appears to have a larger impact, both positive and negative, on women than on men. While people evaluate men on a variety of characteristics, women are largely evaluated based on their physical appearance (Seidman & Miller, 2013). Seidman and Miller (2013) used eye-tracking software to record which areas of Facebook profiles people looked at when viewing the profiles of an attractive and unattractive person of each gender. First, 30 undergraduate students rated a set of 22 photographs based on physical attractiveness. The researchers used these ratings to determine which photographs to use in the profiles for the attractive and unattractive test conditions. Then, they asked a different set of 51 undergraduate students to view the profiles of an attractive and unattractive male and female while eye-tracking software recorded their gaze. They found that

participants spent significantly more time looking at the pictures for female profiles, whereas they spent significantly more time looking at the Likes and Interests sections for male profiles. This finding indicates that people may be more likely to judge women based on physical appearance than men when forming initial impressions.

Additionally, men may pay more attention physical appearance than women do when meetings someone new. Straaten et al. (2010) tracked the gaze of 115 undergraduate students to determine how the gender of the participant and the level of attractiveness of an other-gender confederate influenced the amount of time the participant spent looking at the confederate during a conversation. The researchers determined each confederate's level of attractiveness by asking students from another university to rate photographs of the confederates based on physical attractiveness. Then, they tracked participant gaze as each participant conversed with a confederate in a room designed to look like a bar. They found that men with an attractive confederate gazed longer than men with a less attractive confederate. However, no significant differences in gaze length existed between women with an attractive confederate and women with an unattractive confederate. This finding may suggest that facial attractiveness is more important to men than to women.

Benefits of attractiveness for women. Under most circumstances, being physically attractive seems to be more beneficial to women than to men, even though both genders benefit from physical attractiveness. This effect is especially pronounced in the area of dating and relationships. Men generally prefer attractive women as romantic partners, so attractive women may have more opportunities for dating and relationships than their less attractive peers (Ha et al., 2012; Langlois et al., 2000; Lee et al., 2008; Lennon & Kenny, 2013; Singh, 2004; Straaten et al., 2010). In Straaten et al.'s (2010) study of gaze length during male-female interactions,

discussed previously, a correlation existed between the time men spent looking at the female confederate and their ratings of how much they would like to date the confederate (Straaten et al., 2010). Men gazed at attractive women longer, which suggests that they preferred the attractive confederates as potential romantic partners. For women in this study, no correlation existed between the amount of time they looked at the confederate and their rating of how interested they were in dating the confederate. These findings suggest that physical attractiveness may provide a greater advantage to women than to men in romantic situations.

Physical attractiveness may occasionally be more beneficial to women than to men in the workplace. Nicklin and Roch (2008) looked at the impact of gender, physical attractiveness, and exaggeration in letters of reference on perceptions of employability. They gave 244 participants a packet containing a job description, resume, photograph, and letter of recommendation, and asked the participants to rate the applicants on measures of hirability and success. When the application packet contained a non-exaggerated letter of reference, participants rated the attractive female applicants as significantly more likely to be successful than attractive male applicants. However, when the packet contained an exaggerated letter, the effects of gender and level of attractiveness on predictions of success disappeared, which showed that a strong recommendation was a more important factor in hiring decisions than gender or level of attractiveness. Also, physical attractiveness is not universally more beneficial to women than men in the workplace, which I will discuss in further detail in the following section.

Drawbacks of attractiveness for women. As discussed in Chapter III, physical attractiveness is not beneficial in every situation, particularly for women. For example, attractiveness seems to occasionally have a negative impact on how women are viewed as potential employees. Johnson et al. (2010) found that attractive women were sometimes

considered less suitable for certain types of jobs, such as stereotypically masculine jobs where physical appearance was not important to the work performed (e.g., truck driver). Additionally, Abramowitz and O'Grady (1991) examined how gender, attractiveness, and intelligence impacted perceptions of employability by asking 40 male and 40 female students to judge which potential applicants of varying gender, intelligence, and attractiveness they would recommend hiring for a peer counselor position. In general, the participants preferred attractive applicants preferred over unattractive ones. However, for less intelligent applicants, attractiveness had a positive effect on ratings of employability for male applicants but a negative effect for female applicants. These findings reinforce the idea that attractiveness occasionally has drawbacks for women, but rarely has a negative impact on men.

Harmful effects of the emphasis on female physical appearance. The importance society places on female attractiveness may negatively impact women's self-esteem and self-image. In general, women tend to be more critical than men of their own appearance (Franzoi et al., 2012; Landstedt & Gådin, 2012). Landstedt and Gådin (2012) found that teenage girls in Sweden experienced significantly more stress related to their appearance than teenage boys. Also, Franzoi et al. (2012) assessed the differences in how men and women compared their appearance to others and how comparison impacted their body-esteem. They found that women were more likely than men to compare themselves to people who were more attractive than themselves. This comparison style, known as upward social comparison, correlated with lower body-esteem scores for women. For men, appearance comparison style was not related to body-esteem scores. Additionally, men were about twice as likely as women to report that they believed that were capable of achieving an ideal face or body. These findings suggest that

women feel less positive about their physical appearance than men, possibly due to the enormous amount of pressure to be physically attractive women experience.

Physical attractiveness and race. In the United States, White people are privileged over people of color (Hays, 2008). Racism and White privilege may impact our idea of what is beautiful. However, the research exploring what people find most attractive in regards to race is mixed and inconclusive. Sewell (2012) asked 300 college age men and women to take a survey about their preferences for physical characteristics in women to determine whether preferences differ by race. The sample was 64% White, 13% Latino, 14% Black, 2% Asian, and 7% other. Participants chose dark eyes as the least attractive eye color for both men and women, which may indicate that racism impacts beauty standards since dark brown eyes most commonly occur in people of color. However, they also found that participants generally judged the skin color option closest to their own as most attractive. Additionally, White and Asian participants reported a preference for straight hair, whereas Latino and Black participants reported a preference for wavy hair. These findings may indicate that people generally prefer physical characteristics similar to their own, regardless of their race.

Other studies have specifically explored whether people have a preference for the physical appearance of Black or White individuals. Lewis (2011) asked eighteen White participants to judge the attractiveness of pictures of people of the other gender who appeared to be Black, White, or a combination of both racial backgrounds. Lewis found that female participants rated the Black men as more attractive than the White or mixed race men. However, male participants rated mixed race women as more attractive than White women, and White women as more attractive than Black women. In other words, gender may impact racial preference in physical appearance. In another study, both Black and White women rated Black

women as more attractive than White women, and Black participants had higher self-esteem than White participants (Davis, Sbrocco, Odoms-Young, & Smith, 2010). These findings introduce the possibility that people may prefer the appearance of Black women to White women. Since these studies provided inconsistent information about racial preferences in physical appearance, a meta-analysis of studies looking the impact of race on judgments of physical attractiveness may provide more conclusive evidence of how racism impacts our standards of attractiveness.

However, even though the research regarding how race might influence beauty standards is mixed, people of color often feel pressured to conform to White beauty standards (Aizura, 2009; Haboush, Warren, & Benuto, 2012; Jones, 2010; Robinson, 2011; Schuller, 2009; Silverman, 1998). Although Black women generally score lower than White, Asian, or Latina on measures of the internalization of beauty standards, meaning their ideas of what is beautiful are less influenced by messages from society, Black women realize that ideas of beauty may be shaped by racism (Haboush et al., 2012; Robinson, 2011). Robinson (2011) interviewed 38 Black women between the ages of 19 and 81 to explore the relationship between race and hair preferences. Most of the women interviewed identified hair that was straight, wavy, or easy to manage as "good hair" and hair that had a coarse texture as "bad hair." Many of these women straightened their hair to make it easier to manage, although some wished their hair could be coarser so they could wear certain hairstyles more easily. These findings suggest that White beauty standards may impact what Black women think is beautiful and how they feel about their own appearances.

Additionally, many companies have started providing beauty products and cosmetic surgery that make people appear Whiter (Aizura, 2009; Jones, 2010; Schuller, 2009; Silverman, 1998). Skin lightening products, which have been criticized as racist, are sold in many areas of

the world, including Asia, Africa, North America, the Caribbean, and the Middle East (Jones, 2010). In Thailand, rhinoplasty and double fold eyelid surgery are available to mimic the appearance of White features (Aizura, 2009). In America, many stores carry cosmetics and hair care products specifically designed for Black consumers (Silverman, 1998). Silverman (1998) explained that this industry has "been shaped by racism and racial discrimination in mainstream society from the industry's inception to the contemporary period" (p. 571). Although adopting an appearance that fits White beauty standards more closely may reduce the amount of oppression experienced by people of color, it also perpetuates racialized beauty standards by reinforcing the idea that Whiteness is attractive (Robinson, 2011; Schuller, 2009).

Physical attractiveness and social class. Social class and socioeconomic status may also influence access to and judgments of attractiveness (Greitmeyer, 2005; Ha et al., 2012; Peralta, 2003). For example, Peralta (2003) discussed how social forces contribute to obesity. People and communities with a higher socioeconomic status have greater access to healthy foods, more opportunities to exercise, and greater access to education about nutrition and health. Additionally, more social pressure to be thin exists in wealthier communities. Physical fitness is only one aspect of attractiveness, but people with more money can also spend more on cosmetics, skincare products, hair care products, clothes, and other items and services that may improve physical attractiveness.

For men, having a higher social class may also improve their sexual attractiveness to potential partners. Ha et al. (2012) found that physical attractiveness and social status both contribute to overall ratings of desirability in relationship partners. Additionally, although the straight men in their study valued physical appearance over social status, the straight women valued social status over physical appearance. Greitmeyer (2005) looked at factors that impact

willingness to accept sexual offers for men and women. Men were willing to accept sexual offers from women who were physically attractive, regardless of the woman's socioeconomic status. However, while women were more likely to accept offers from physically attractive men for a short-term encounter, they were equally likely to accept offers from attractive men or men of a high socioeconomic status for long-term involvement. These findings show that while social class may not have much impact on perceptions of female attractiveness, it plays a large role in perceptions of male attractiveness.

Physical attractiveness and age. Younger people are generally perceived as more attractive than older people (Fink & Neave, 2005; Kwart et al., 2012; Lynn, 2009; Mathes et al., 1985; Perlini, Marcello, Hansen, & Pudney, 2001). This bias may be linked to a biological preference for youth, but it may also reflect discrimination against people who are older (Fink & Neave, 2005; Haboush et al., 2012; Hays, 2008; McKelvie, 1993). McKelvie (1993) asked 31 undergraduate students to make judgments about the age, level of attractiveness, and personality characteristics of 16 hand-drawn faces. McKelvie found that participants more often judged younger faces as pleasant and older faces as unpleasant. However, this effect did not occur when female participants judged drawings of faces that appeared female. Gender may also impact perceptions of attractiveness in older adults (Foos & Clark, 2011; Mathes et al., 1985). Mathes et al. (1985) found a negative relationship between age and physical attractiveness in ratings of women made by men, but not in ratings of men made by women. Additionally, Foos and Clark (2011) examined age differences in perceptions of physical attractiveness. They asked 38 participants in each of three age groups (17 to 25, 35 to 55, and 60 to 87) to judge the attractiveness of 10 photographs of faces from each of the age groups. They found that people rated male and female faces equally attractive if they were young or middle aged, but they

judged older male faces as more attractive than older female faces. These findings show that while younger people are generally judged as more attractive than older people, gender influences judgments of attractiveness based on age.

Also, Haboush et al. (2012) studied whether the internalization of beauty standards in regard to age varies by race. They asked 281 women under the age of 30 to complete the General Internalization Subscale of the Sociocultural Attitudes Towards Appearance Questionnaire and the Kogan's Attitudes Toward Old People scale. Across racial groups, internalization of beauty standards correlated with negative attitudes toward older adults. Since this is a correlational finding, it could mean that internalizing beauty standards leads people to have more negative perceptions of older adults, having negative attitudes toward older adults reinforces the internalization of beauty standards, or a third factor increases the both the likelihood that people will internalize beauty standards and the likelihood that they will have negative attitudes toward older adults. Although correlational research does not allow us to draw conclusions about causality, this finding supports the idea that the oppression of older people may be related to standards of attractiveness that favor younger appearances.

Impact of viewer age on perceptions of attractiveness. The age of the person doing the looking may also influence perceptions of physical attractiveness in others. Foos and Clark (2001) found that younger adults were generally harsher critics than older adults when judging the physical appearance of people of any age. Additionally, they found that people generally rated people who were their own age or younger as more attractive than those who were older than themselves. Viewer age may also influence the meaning the viewer assigns to physical attractiveness. Dushenko, Perry, Schilling, and Smolarski (1978) studied whether both children and older adults hold a positive stereotype for people who were more physically attractive. They

found that female children endorsed the attractiveness stereotype much more strongly than older women, but men endorsed the stereotype stably across the lifespan.

Managing attractiveness to cope with aging. As people age, many try to look more attractive to cope with the reality that they are becoming older or to mitigate the effects of ageism (Francis, 2011; Reel, SooHoo, Summerhays, & Gill, 2008; Winterich, 2007). People often experience weight gain, gray hair, increased facial hair, and wrinkles as they get older (Jones, 2010; Winterich, 2007). Since the media sends negative messages about the appearance of older women in particular, many women take steps to improve their physical appearance as they age (Francis, 2011; Reel et al., 2008). Some older women choose clothes that reaffirm their identity to cope with aging (Francis, 2011). They may also manage their physical appearance though exercise and cosmetic surgery (Reel et al., 2008). Some men and women try to look younger specifically to avoid discrimination due to their age (Jones, 2010; Winterich, 2007). Unfortunately, people who attempt to look younger than they are may be viewed as less likable and more deceitful, making it incredibly difficult to diminish the discrimination that comes with aging (Schoemann & Branscombe, 2011).

Physical attractiveness and disability status. People with physical or developmental disabilities are generally viewed as less attractive or socially desirable than people who do not have a disability (Kleck & DeJong, 1983; Mayo & Mayo, 2013; Ostrander, 2009; Rojahn, Komelasky, & Man, 2008; Solvang, 2007). Some researchers believe people with disabilities are stigmatized because people experience aesthetic anxiety, the realization that our bodies are fragile and anyone could acquire a disability, when they interact with people who have a disability (Solvang, 2007). Also, Ostrander (2009) studied sexual relationships and intimacy in individuals with spinal cord injuries and found that people tend to view people with physical

disabilities as asexual or incapable of engaging in sex, which can make people with disabilities feel less attractive or desirable than people without disabilities (Ostrander, 2009).

Though many people like to believe they do not discriminate against people with disabilities, tests that measure unconscious biases have revealed that they do (Rojahn et al., 2008). Rojahn et al. (2008) asked 41 students to fill out a Romantic Attraction Scale, which measured explicit attitudes toward people with physical disabilities, and to complete an Implicit Association Test, which measured implicit attitudes toward people with disabilities. The students did not show a preference for people without physical disabilities on the explicit measure; however, they showed a moderately strong preference for people without disabilities on the implicit measure. This finding demonstrated social desirability bias, which occurs when participants in a study report attitudes or behaviors they feel like they should have instead of those they actually have.

Additionally, Mayo and Mayo (2013) studied the willingness off college students to date a peer who stuttered. They asked 66 men and 66 women to complete a questionnaire assessing their familiarity with stuttering and their willingness to date someone who stutters. Only 38% said they would date a peer who stuttered, an additional 50% said maybe, and 12% said they would not. Those who said they might date someone who stuttered reported that personality, severity of stuttering, physical attractiveness, and intelligence would impact their decision. This study shows that disabilities such as stuttering may make people less romantically attractive to their peers. The finding also suggests that physical attractiveness may improve the desirability of people with certain disabilities as potential romantic partners.

People with disabilities who are physically attractive may be viewed more positively in general than people with disabilities who are less attractive. McGarry and West (1975) studied

how mobility, communication ability, and physical appearance impact staff perceptions of patients at an inpatient treatment center for adults with developmental or cognitive disabilities. They found that more attractive physical appearance and greater communication ability correlated with more positive interactions from the staff. Also, Kleck and DeJong (1983) studied whether children prefer friends without physical disabilities and how physical attractiveness may impact friend choice. They studied 61 girls and 60 boys between the ages of 7 and 14 who attended a summer camp where more than half the campers had a physical disability or chronic illness. The researchers interviewed each child about which campers in their cabin group they liked best and asked a group of 24 children from a neighboring summer camp to rate the physical attractiveness of each child. They found that, in general, the more attractive children were better liked than their less attractive peers. Additionally, children with a physical disability were viewed as less attractive than those who did not have an obvious physical disability. Finally, they found that the more physically attractive children with disabilities were viewed as more likable than less attractive children with disabilities. These findings suggest that the relationship between attractiveness and the treatment of people with disabilities may go two ways: the presence of an obvious disability impacts perceptions of attractiveness, and level of attractiveness impacts perceptions and treatment of people who have disabilities. Also, as mentioned earlier, having a disability may influence self-perceptions of physical attractiveness or desirability.

Although this section discussed biases against people with both physical and developmental disabilities, every disability is different. Someone who has lost an arm or leg may experience different types and amounts of discrimination, bias, and oppression than someone who stutters or someone who has Down syndrome. Studies regarding one type of disability may

not be applicable to other disabilities. However, it appears that attractiveness privilege influences the treatment of different types of disabilities.

Conclusion. This section discussed how physical attractiveness interacts with gender, age, race, social class, and ability status to create unique experiences of privilege and oppression for each individual. However, the information presented here is only the beginning. Privilege based on attractiveness may overlap with each category in ways I did not discover during my research. Additionally, attractiveness may impact many other other areas of privilege and oppression not discussed here. Finally, intersectionality can take into account more than just two categories. For example, people perceive older men as more attractive than older women (Foos & Clark, 2011). This finding looks at the intersection between age, attractiveness, and gender. I would encourage the reader to continue considering how intersectionality can be applied to physical attractiveness in ways not discussed in this section.

Conflict Theory

Conflict theory can be used to provide a potential explanation for why attractiveness privilege continues to occur despite the commonly held belief that internal characteristics should matter more than external ones. According to conflict theory, people with more power are able to create systems, organizations, and social norms that reinforce their own power while oppressing others. In addition to benefitting attractive people, attractiveness privilege also economically benefits business leaders in the beauty industry. Leaders of this industry, as well as those who work within it, have the power to use advertising to shape our society's standards of physical attractiveness and reinforce the idea that being attractive gives people many advantages in life.

The beauty industry. The beauty industry began with people who created perfume in ancient Rome (Jones, 2010). Since then, the industry has globalized and grown exponentially

(Jones, 2010; Wells, 2006). Worldwide, people spend about $330 billion on beauty products each year. In the United States alone, sales of beauty products and services reach $52 billion annually. The beauty industry continues to grow as developing areas of the world become wealthier (Jones, 2010; Wells, 2006). Additionally, the beauty industry has mainly targeted women in the past, but is increasingly marketing to men in order to expand its consumer base (Qian, 2007). According to Jones (2010), the beauty industry is "one of America's most profitable industries, just behind pharmaceuticals and software, and far above the average of all industries" (p. 1).

However, the beauty industry has experienced criticism from both consumers and scholars (Drake, Jeffs, Crumbie, & Clarke, 2010; Jones, 2010; Warbanski, 2007). First, the beauty industry sells products and services that may be harmful to the health of consumers (Drake et al., 2009; Warbanski, 2007). The industry has also been criticized for imposing "Western, and White, values and perceptions on much of the rest of the world" (Jones, 2010, p. 7). Some products and advertising campaigns have even promoted racism (Jones, 2010). From 1890-1920, the advertising for Pears' Soap claimed that the soap would whiten the skin of Black people, which would make them more civilized. Racism in beauty products and advertising still exists today, although usually in subtler ways.

The beauty industry has been especially susceptible to feminist critiques. Between 1960 and 1970, the industry started receiving criticism that advertising created unrealistic standards of female beauty (Jones, 2010). In other words, the beauty industry profited by making women feel inadequate so they would buy and consume more products. Roddick (1991), the founder of The Body Shop and a proponent for ethical marketing practices, once described the beauty industry as a business "that in order to justify its own spurious existence, must believe that the world is

filled with women desperate to cling to their fading youth, eager to believe nonsense dreamed up by cynical advertising copywriters, and willing to pay ever bigger prices for ever smaller portions of lotions not much more effective than any old grease you care to think about" (p. 11). Additionally, although women originally founded many of the major beauty companies, most people who profit from the beauty industry today are men.

Advertising. Like many other industries, the beauty industry promotes its products and services through advertising. By the early 1960s, the beauty industry in America alone spent $152 million on television advertising annually (Jones, 2010). Unfortunately, exposure to advertising has the power to influence beauty ideals and increase body dissatisfaction in viewers (Luther, 2009; Stephens & Hill, 1994). The widespread use of advertising began to shape American beauty ideals, especially in regards to female body size (Jones, 2010; Stephens & Hill, 1994). Thin, White models were used in runway shows and in print advertisements, which promoted the idea that thin figures and White features were more attractive than fuller body types or the features of people of color (Jones, 2010).

Advertising can also reinforce the attractiveness stereotype that beauty leads to acceptance and success. Moeran (2010) performed a content analysis of more than 700 issues of Elle, Vogue, and Marie Claire to examine how magazines portray female beauty and found that magazines tend to present beauty in a contradictory way. The magazines included articles discussing how to achieve a naturally beautiful look, the importance of smiling to look attractive, and how beauty comes from within. However, they also included many articles and advertisements that focused solely on improving outward beauty. Moeran (2010) explained:

> In part, fashion magazines reinforce a classic prejudice. But this is only part of the beauty story that they tell their readers. After all, if they were to be consistent in their avowals

> that beauty really *did* come from within, they would never be funded by cosmetics and skincare companies' advertising in the way that they are. (p. 494)

Advertising also promotes the idea that if we become more attractive, our lives will be better (Moeran, 2010). To respond to feminist critiques and the women's liberation movement, advertisers began using images of beautiful, fashionable women in traditionally male roles in their advertisements (Jones, 2010). For example, women in these advertisements might wear business suits or pose next to sports cars to portray the image of power and success. However, although advertisements promoted the idea that women could achieve more than just beauty, they also reinforced the idea that being beautiful leads to a more successful life.

Conclusion. Prior to the industrialization, attractiveness privilege primarily benefited those who were more physically attractive. While this is still true today, beauty has also become an enormous industry that imparts wealth and power to those who lead its large corporations as well as those who work within them. This incredibly influential industry also shapes our ideas of what is attractive and reinforces attractiveness stereotypes. From the conflict theory perspective, the industry thrives because business leaders profit from the oppression of those who are less attractive and promote oppression based on level of attractiveness through advertising.

Synthesis

Physical attractiveness is a characteristic that privileges some and oppresses others, much like the more commonly recognized areas of privilege, such as gender and race. Like other types of privilege, it overlaps with and is influenced by other characteristics that lead to privilege or oppression. Additionally, attractiveness privilege is perpetuated on both individual and systemic levels, much like White privilege or male privilege. Attractiveness privilege should be included in textbooks and lectures about privilege and oppression, and people working within the field of

social work should keep it in mind as they interact with clients. The following section will discuss my recommendations for incorporating awareness of attractiveness privilege into social work practice, policy, and research.

Implications for Social Work Practice, Policy, and Research

As social workers, once we recognize that privilege or oppression exists in a certain area, we have a responsibility to begin working to create greater equality. This section will discuss the relevance of attractiveness privilege to the field of social work and provide suggestions for how we can begin to dismantle attractiveness privilege.

Implications for therapy. Whether clinicians realize it or not, physical attractiveness impacts the therapeutic relationship. First, counselors often prefer their clients who are more physically attractive (Ponzo, 1985). The appearance of a client can also impact the counselor's perception of the severity of the client's mental illness. More attractive clients are generally viewed as having better mental health than less attractive clients in both inpatient and outpatient settings (Martin, Friedmeyer, & Moore, 1997; Ponzo, 1985). Additionally, clients may prefer attractive counselors over less attractive ones (Ponzo, 1985; Harris & Busby, 1998). Clients are more likely to perceive a physically attractive counselor as intelligent, trustworthy, friendly, assertive, competent, and likeable (Ponzo, 1985). Clients also generally feel more comfortable disclosing personal issues to attractive counselors (Harris & Busby, 1998). Finally, clients report better expectations for the outcome of therapy when working with an attractive therapist (Ponzo, 1985).

***Client concerns related to physical appearance*.** Clients may bring up issues or concerns related to their physical appearance in therapy. For some clients, such as those who have body dysmorphic disorder, concerns about physical appearance may even be their primary reason for

seeking therapy. Body dysmorphic disorder is a preoccupation with small or imagined physical imperfections (Buhlmann, Teachman, Gerbershagen, Kikul, & Rief, 2008; Schmoll, 2011). Clients with body dysmorphic disorder have higher rates of depression, have lower self-esteem, and place more emphasis on the importance of physical attractiveness than those who do not have the disorder. Therapists should educate themselves about mental illness that can impact client perceptions of physical appearance and always take client concerns about attractiveness seriously in therapy.

Clients who have experienced a major illness may also have concerns about their attractiveness. Women diagnosed with HIV often experience decreased sexual satisfaction following their diagnosis, which is partially explained by diminished feelings of attractiveness (Siegel, Schrimshaw, & Lekas, 2006). Also, Begovic-Juhant, Chmielewski, Iwuagwu, and Chapman (2012) asked 70 female survivors of breast cancer to complete a questionnaire that explored the link between body-esteem and depression following cancer treatment. Of the women surveyed, 58% felt less attractive after their treatment and 56% were depressed according to the Center for Disease Control Epidemiological Scale. The researchers also found a strong significant relationship between body image and depression, quality of life, emotional well-being, and social well-being. While worrying about one's appearance may seem like a shallow or unimportant concern, therapists should understand that concerns about physical appearance can cause clients a considerable amount of distress. Therapists should also recognize that physical appearance legitimately impacts the quality of a client's life, so concerns about attractiveness should be addressed in therapy.

Physical attractiveness and severe mental illness. Severe mental illnesses can lead to a decline in physical attractiveness (Long, Ritchie, Dolley, & Collins, 2013; Seeman, 2011).

People with certain mental illness have more difficulty caring for their appearance, often lack access to resources that could improve their hygiene or appearance due to poverty, and may take anti-psychotic medications, which can cause weight gain, hirsutism, cataracts, and acne (Seeman, 2011). At least one program exists to improve the self-care and grooming skills of women receiving inpatient treatment in order to make their transition back into the community easier (Long et al., 2013). This program consists of 16 weeks of 90-minute group sessions that cover topics like body image, body health, body-oriented therapy, and the presentation of self in everyday life. Following completion of this program, 19 women with schizophrenia or personality disorders showed significant improvement in their basic appearance, level of self-care, and body satisfaction. Therapists should recognize that self-care and improvement of physical appearance are tools that can help clients improve their social and emotional well-being.

Dismantling attractiveness privilege. Overcoming privilege and oppression based on physical attractiveness begins on an individual level. Social workers can start by recognizing countertrasference reactions to the physical appearance of clients. Ponzo (1985) suggested that therapists write down adjectives that described their attractive and unattractive female and male clients to become more aware of their personal biases and their reactions to the physical attractiveness of clients. Once therapists are aware of any unconscious biases they may have toward less attractive clients, they can begin to observe how attractiveness privilege influences sessions with clients and begin to challenge their own negative beliefs about less attractive clients. Therapists should also consider how their own level of attractiveness might impact their relationship with clients.

On an interpersonal level, people can avoid commenting on or complimenting the physical attractiveness of others, since this strengthens the idea that attractiveness is meaningful

and important. Instead, people should reinforce the importance of internal traits by providing compliments based on knowledge, skills, abilities, and personality traits. Individuals can also become more aware of how consuming media and advertising can benefit companies that promote attractiveness privilege. Instead of buying products from companies that use unrealistic images of attractiveness in their advertisements, we can promote responsible advertising by purchasing from companies that that use realistic models in their advertisements or promote their products without using models at all. We can also write letters to advertisers encouraging them to use realistic models in advertisements. If enough people begin making these small changes in their lives, we may begin to see larger changes.

We can also begin to tackle attractiveness privilege on a societal level through policy changes that impact education. McIntosh (2012) believed privilege studies should be included as an area of coursework in universities and should be discussed in any course that discusses oppression. In addition, I believe attractiveness privilege should be included in any discussion of privileged statuses, along with the more commonly recognized types of privilege. I also believe every social work program should include a discussion of attractiveness privilege in their curriculum.

Additionally, we should create policies to raise awareness of attractiveness privilege within the public school system. Ponzo (1985) discussed the importance of grade school teachers becoming aware that adults have an innate tendency to attribute positive traits to children, since this bias impacts how teachers interact with and grade their students. If teachers treat all children equally regardless of the child's level of physical attractiveness, less attractive children may experience fewer disadvantages later in life. We should also educate the students themselves about privilege and oppression, and about how advertising creates unrealistic

standards of physical attractiveness. If possible, we could also create policies to regulate how physical attractiveness is portrayed in advertisements and in the media.

Directions for future research. Although extensive research has examined how physical attractiveness impacts the way we perceive and treat others, many areas remain unexplored. First, future scholars should examine how physical attractiveness interacts with areas of privilege that were not included earlier, such as sexual orientation, gender identity, religion. Also, researchers could examine other theoretical perspectives that may provide explanations for why more attractive people experience privilege, like critical theory or feminist theory. Researchers may also want to look into potential barriers to achieving equality in the way people of varying levels of attractiveness are treated. For example, they could study the degree to which people feel like the preferential treatment of attractive individuals is natural or justified. From a therapeutic perspective, it would also be interesting to find out if improving physical attractiveness in clients can help improve their mental health, perhaps due to an increase in self-esteem, better relationships, or a sense of personal agency.

Conclusion

Physical attractiveness provides meaningful, unearned benefits to attractive individuals across many different areas of their lives. This bias is incredibly unfair, since people have little control over their natural body type and physical features. Additionally, physical attractiveness provides much less value to society than other characteristics that may not privilege individuals, such as kindness, intelligence, empathy, and generosity. By recognizing that attractiveness privilege exists, realizing the ways it impacts each of our lives, and understanding why and how this type of privilege continues to exist, we can take steps toward creating a society that values internal attributes instead of external ones.

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