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Beauty, Intelligence and Height: the Black Holes of Sociology

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Beauty, intelligence and height: the black holes of sociology

by Catherine Hakim

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Sarti's article treats height as a proxy for material advantage and disadvantage. At first sight, this seems reasonable, given the correlation between socio-economic status and height. However the research literature he reviews points instead to treating height as a genetic, or biological factor. Sarti's results are certainly useful. But the article as a whole illustrates the way sociologists resolutely ignore what they loosely label as 'biological' factors, or else they try to convert such variables into social factors.

Sociology has always been resistant to the idea that biology is important in the social world. The sociological emphasis has always been on the socio-economic factors that matter more – or so sociologists assert. But is this always true? Sarti's article gives us good reasons to treat genetic inheritance as one important factor in sociological analyses.

Today, height is determined three-quarters by genetics and only one-quarter by social environment – the good nutrition and freedom from disease etc that traditionally were concentrated in the higher classes. Sarti reviews evidence showing that social characteristics mattered *more* in the past, when living conditions were worse for most people, so that higher parental income made a real difference to outcomes for their children. Paradoxically, as living conditions improve, genetics matter *more* today! In poor countries, genetics and the social environment remain equally important determinants of height. In modern affluent societies of the OECD club, genetics outweigh socio-economic status by three to one. This upward trend in the *relative* importance of genetics versus social context for adult height suggests that sociolo-

gists must now abandon their traditional hostility to what are often contemptuously dismissed as ‘biological’ factors. Perhaps the new research developments in genetics will help, by replacing the loose conceptual bag of ‘biology’ with the hard science and modern status of genetics.

In any case, Sarti himself shows that variation in height is a weak proxy measure for socio-economic differences in modern societies like Italy. Height is better treated as a direct measure of stature itself, a physical and genetically determined variable which has a substantive and important influence on social, psychological and economic outcomes in adult life for both men and women, children and adults alike [Cohen 2009].

Sarti is in good company. Sociologists have systematically ignored many concrete and salient factors that have a demonstrable impact on success in life – on social and economic outcomes and quality of life. Along with height, weight (as measured by BMI – Body Mass Index), beauty and intelligence have all been thrown into black holes, rendering them invisible in sociological research no matter how powerful they are. This is no longer logical or defensible, given the *increasing* importance of genetics in determining adult outcomes in rich countries.

TAB. 1. *The relative impact of intelligence, appearance and qualifications for adult incomes*

	Direct Effects	Indirect Effects	Total Effects
General intelligence	.41	.11	.52
Core self-evaluation	.23		.23
Educational qualifications	.18		.18
Physical attractiveness	.13	.08	.21

Source: Extracted from Table 3 in Judge, Hurst and Simon 2009, p. 750.

Intelligence

Sociologists rarely include measures of IQ in their studies of social stratification and social mobility. Even when the topic is educational attainment, social class (or Socio-Economic Status) is far more likely to be the central variable of interest for analyses. Yet it is well-established that IQ levels have been rising slowly but steadily over the past century, while social class seems to be dwindling in importance even for the topics where it was crucial, such as political attitudes and values and voting patterns. Fortunately, social psychologists do invest the time and effort required to measure IQ in many of their studies. When studies of adult outcomes include cogni-

tive ability as a variable, it is shown to be far and away the most important determinant of success in life.¹

A recent example is the Harvard Study of Health and Life Quality. This was extended to a Boston area special study of adult careers, which included a battery of tests to measure cognitive ability and personality as well as taking portrait photos, front and profile, of all respondents so that they could be rated for physical attractiveness. Although sociologists focus doggedly on educational qualifications as the key determinant of life chances (as illustrated by Sarti himself) this turns out to be the least important factor in wide-angle research (Table 1).

Self-confidence (core self evaluation) and physical attractiveness are even more important than qualifications, all else equal. However sheer intelligence has by far the greatest impact on success in life,² being twice as important as attractiveness, confidence and qualifications. Even after taking account of intelligence, good looks raise income, partly by enhancing educational attainment, personality and confidence – the indirect effects of the ‘beauty premium’ (Table 1). The *relative* importance of educational qualifications for success is vastly overstated in sociological research because sociologists routinely ignore and omit other key predictors such as IQ, confidence and appearance, so they attribute their impact to qualifications alone.

The latest studies confirm that intelligence is 50% genetic and inborn and 50% due to social environment – *both* nature and nurture, so IQ cannot be treated as mainly one or the other. Similarly, educational attainment is explained in equal measure by genetic ability and by social environment (including the effects of social class of origin) – so it is not purely or primarily a social factor, as sociologists regularly pretend [Lucchini et al 2013]. My guess is that attractiveness is also about 50% due to good genes and 50% due to skills of self-presentation, the investment of time and effort, knowing what looks ‘right’. Beauties like Elizabeth Taylor or Monica Vitti are exceptional, and very rare. Most people who are above-average in looks have worked hard at keeping slim and fit, choosing flattering colours and styles of clothes, and developing their social skills. Recent studies find a small 0.10 correlation between intelligence and good looks [Hakim 2011].

¹ As with height, people who lie at the extreme top end of the distribution may not be successful. Extreme tallness quickly becomes a disability. Some people with exceptionally high IQs (MENSA members) may find it reduces their social competence or becomes a social liability. There are many accounts of MENSA members who ended up working in relatively menial jobs.

² Success was measured by total household income rather than personal earnings. Hence beautiful women (and men) who married into wealthy families, or married spouses who became wealthy were recorded as having high quality of life even if they themselves had no job and personal income. In effect, the study recorded the value of attractiveness in the marriage market as well as in the labour market.

Sociology's myopic blindness to those factors that have been labelled as 'not social', or as 'biological' results in a one-eyed view of social life that can lead to serious errors.

Beauty

When research shows that attractive men and women earn between 10% and 20% more than the unattractive, on average across the entire workforce, the unthinking reaction is to label this as discrimination [Rhode 2010; Hamermesh 2011]. A closer look at the social processes underlying these results reveals that the beauty premium is productivity-related. Like height, beauty is *not* superficial and socially irrelevant. It is well-established that tall people also earn more, and are more successful in many ways, but this is never labelled as discrimination, so there is a hidden bias against beauty in the west.

Men and women who are attractive achieve smoother social interaction and deliver better results. They sell more goods and services, policies and ideas; are more persuasive; attract more cooperation and assistance from others; are perceived as more intelligent, competent and honest and are treated accordingly; are more effective in a huge range of occupations, including law and management as well as sales, marketing, the hospitality and entertainment industries [Hakim 2011]. Even academics are rated as better teachers by their students if they are physically attractive [Hamermesh 2011]. Physical attractiveness is closely linked to social attractiveness, social skills and social competence – the 'soft skills' that are becoming more important in knowledge economies and are not measured by formal qualifications.

Other research shows that beauty is a valued product in its own right, a luxury that we choose to afford as we become wealthier. For example, people prefer to buy a product from an attractive salesperson, even when they know it makes no difference to the transaction. Students paying a small fortune for their higher education courses prefer to look at a smartly-dressed and well-groomed professor because it makes the tedium of a one-hour lecture more enjoyable or more tolerable. Physical and social attractiveness – beauty and charm – have genuine substantive value. They confer status [Webster and Driskell 1983] and are modern luxuries [Hakim 2011]. Finally, there are the obvious side-benefits in private life: attractive people have more lively sex lives, have more choice of partners, have more power within couple bargaining, and generally have an easier time all round [Hakim 2011, 2012].

The way forward

Knowledge economies are meritocracies, or try to be. Educational qualifications are a partial measure of all the talents and abilities that people deploy in their working lives, and in their social lives. Just one example: the multi-millionaire and entrepreneur Richard Branson has no formal qualifications. Human capital has value, but it can be outweighed by the value of economic, social and erotic capital, and by other factors sociologists have ignored, such as IQ, height and physical attractiveness. These last variables are heavily determined by genetic inheritance, which has been shown to be of *increasing* importance in modern affluent societies. It is time for sociology to pick up a wide-angle camera lens for analysing social reality and social trends. The perspectives, theories and methods of the 19th and 20th centuries are now myopic, no longer fit-for-purpose, and need to be revised and updated to take full account of the changing realities of the 21st century.

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Abstract: Too often, sociologists ignore non-social factors in their research, or transform them into social factors – as illustrated by Sarti treating height as a proxy for social class. He himself shows that genetic factors are of *increasing* importance in affluent societies. Further, height, intelligence, beauty and even educational attainment are a combination of inherited genetic factors and social contextual factors. Yet sociologists cast intelligence, beauty, height and weight into black holes – making them invisible for social research and routinely ignore their role as determinants of success in adult life. New research shows that intelligence, physical attractiveness and personality factors such as self-confidence are more important than educational qualifications for predicting adult incomes.

Keywords: erotic capital, intelligence, social mobility, theory, bias

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