

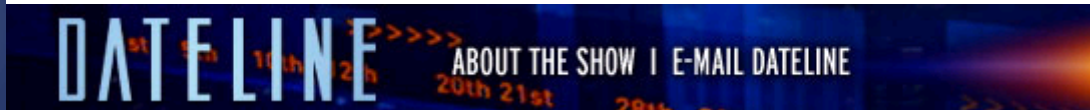
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Face value

Hidden camera investigation: Do looks really matter?

By Keith Morrison

NBC News

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Anybody who watches reality TV knows that when it comes to landing a date with a beautiful woman, the "Average Joe" doesn't stand much of a chance against a handsome hunk. But does the preference for physical attractiveness go deeper than just romance? Even when looks shouldn't count -- for instance, at a bank or the doctor -- are beautiful people treated better than everyone else? With our hidden cameras watching, Dateline set up some tests to find out.

Everybody knows how much importance we attach to beauty, maybe too much sometimes. But have you ever wondered how different life might be if you were just a little better looking?

Anthony Bernard and Allison Meiersonne are models. Good looks help them make a living. Both of them know they are lucky -- it's what they were born with. But we wondered if their genetic advantage in the beauty department could be helping them in ways they never imagined?

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For example, would a stranger come to their aid before assisting an average-looking person? Might they be receiving better service from repair people? Do people trust them more, just because they're good looking?

"A person's physical attractiveness -- the look that they're basically born with -- impacts every individual literally from birth to death," says Dr. Gordon Patzer, dean of the College of Business Administration at Roosevelt University. He's spent 30 years studying and writing about physical attractiveness. "People are valued more who are higher in physical attractiveness. As distasteful as that might be, that's the reality."

Valued more? We wondered and decided to find a group of average, nice looking individuals and super, highly attractive people to test this attractiveness phenomenon. We looked for people with similar traits: the same race, no discernible accents, similar age groups. That way the focus would be exclusively on attractiveness.

So we hired models Anthony and Allison, and asked two NBC employees, Loren and another Anthony, to hit the streets, a bank, an auto shop, and even ride the bus, all the time wearing hidden cameras to see just how much looks matter.

First, we gave our foursome folders filled with papers and had them drop the contents on a New York City street. Would anyone stop to help?

When model Allison drops her file, there seems to be a sudden change in the weather. Is it raining men? A man even uses his cane to stop the pages from flying away.

"It was just amazing how people would flock to me to clean it up," says Allison. "I have dropped my purse and wallet and people always help me pick it up. But I never really thought about if somebody else dropped their wallet, maybe they wouldn't help them. It just seems strange to me."

NBC staffer Loren is about to be that someone else. She drops the papers and people step by, rather than stop. About a dozen people pass by before, finally, a woman offers help.

But that's nothing compared to our other NBC colleague, Anthony.

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When he drops the folder, the sidewalk literally clears. Even as he spreads out the papers he's supposedly collecting, people just walk on by.

"I thought, hey I'm dressed in a shirt and a tie," says Anthony. "I looked pretty professional, so maybe someone may stop and help me out. And people just kept stepping over."

"I felt embarrassed," says Loren. "You know wait a second, I think I'm somewhat attractive. Why didn't anyone help me?"

Model Anthony wouldn't know how that feels. He drops the folder and immediately an entire family stops to help. We wondered if this was just random chance, or is something else going on? We asked Dr. Patzer about our findings.

"That was a classic example of everything we find in the scholarly research that we do," says Dr. Patzer. "Those of higher physical attractiveness are automatically or immediately assisted, provided help."

And, as we saw with the family helping Anthony, it's not just about appealing to the opposite sex. While our research was not scientific, Dr. Patzer says more controlled studies do show people go out of their way to help attractive people of the same and opposite sex because they want to be liked and accepted by these good looking people.

We watched for this willingness to help when our test subjects stood on the street for five minutes seeming hopelessly lost, not asking anybody for assistance, just waiting to see if any kind soul would notice and stop.

Our NBC volunteers had no luck, but our super-attractive models were a different story. Allison had lots of helpers. A man even rolled down his car window to offer assistance. And model Anthony? He'll never be lost.

"I would hold my map and I'd be looking at the map and looking around and I'd make eye contact with someone and boom, they'd be reeled in," says Anthony.

"The lady walks past him, comes back, offers a large explanation of the layout of the city, but even does an ultimate trust...and offers the general part of the city in which she lives," says Dr. Patzer. "So it verifies very well again we trust more those people of higher physical attractiveness."

Trust? We watched to see what would happen when our subjects ask passersby for change of a dollar. Everyone did pretty well here, but there were differences, especially when it came to trust.

Many people did not stop or respond to NBC's Anthony. But for model Anthony, not only did more people stop, but they seemed to feel Anthony was safer, more honest. Like foreign tourists who weren't even sure how much change equals a dollar, so they held out their money and let Anthony take the correct amount.

"We had situations where people were going out of their way to try to do stuff for us that other people didn't get," he says.

For Allison, even if people couldn't find the change to give her, they would offer helpful suggestions. And she says that people just start conversations with her, something we saw when she and Loren went for a bus ride during rush hour. We wondered if anyone would offer them a seat. While sitting proved not to be an option for either of them that morning, one man, who starts out standing equidistant between Loren and Allison, strikes up a conversation with Allison for the entire bus ride.

"He did see me and he chose to speak and maybe flirt a little bit with her," says Loren. "And I felt like the third wheel."

"There are things that happen everyday in daily life and you just don't think about, wow, maybe this person did this to me because I am maybe an attractive woman and they're interested in pursuing me or something like that," says Allison. "It's very interesting."

So does the world seem like a more accommodating and friendly place to her

"Yeah, sometimes people are just more willing to help us," says Allison. "It's strange, but you're given more credibility and you're given a lot more attention when you're attractive looking I guess."

In fact, many people seem to want to help the truly attractive on their journeys to anywhere, which we learned when we had our subjects ask for directions. They're going to approach people this time, walk right up and ask how to find a place that's actually two blocks away.

Nobody was treated rudely, but again, we saw some special treatment. People who simply overheard Allison's inquiry would come over to help. And only Allison was actually escorted to her destination

But we wondered about something else. When time is of the essence,

would people still be so accommodating to our models? It's lunch time and everyone seems to want to go to a particular sandwich shop. The goal for our group is to try to cut the line. Shockingly, everyone is able to find someone to go ahead of. But again, the reactions are different. With our NBCers they are allowed in and the interaction, the conversation just stops. But with Allison, the person she cuts continues the conversation while they wait in line. And the women model Anthony went ahead of seem thrilled to have to wait a little longer to get their lunch.

But what about when the stakes are higher, like when money is involved, or when there is a potential to be ripped off? And might good looks ever be a hindrance? Do beautiful people get better service, better deals, even better medical treatment?

We've seen that life is not necessarily fair. It's even a different world at an auto garage.

With the help of the AAA, we had cars checked over to make sure they were in good working order. Now each of our group will make a trip to the same garage asking for an oil change. Will anyone be told they needed unnecessary repairs?

Everyone receives appropriate service for an appropriate charge, but , model Anthony does receive some different treatment.

"He just seemed enamored and was telling me that I should be on television that I looked like a movie star," Anthony says of the man at the shop.

"Did he give you a deal or anything?" asked Allison.

"No, he didn't," says Anthony. "He didn't even cut me any kind of a deal (you know that happens sometimes people get enamored and throw in an extra thing and say don't worry about it) but it was more that he was just so complimentary."

And good looking individuals get different treatment in some situations you might least expect it, such as a doctor's office.

"We see in medical interactions, patients who go to physicians ,and those of higher physical attractiveness, the physicians will spend more time with that person and will also spend more time answering individual questions that that person asked," says Dr. Patzer.

And this special treatment starts very early on.

"For example, in a nursery, before newborn babies are released from a hospital, those babies who are higher in physical attractiveness, at this level defined as more cute, are touched more, held more and spoken to more," says Dr. Patzer, who notes the trend continues in school.

"You see that those teachers when they interact with children of higher physical attractiveness, they ask more questions, they prompt them for more answers. We expect those children to do better and consequently they fulfill our expectations and they actually do do better."

And says Dr. Patzer, we are just hard wired to respond more favorably to attractive people. Even studies with babies show they will look more intently and longer at prettier faces.

"This is something anthropologically that has existed for as long as history exists," he says.

However, we did find a situation where looks did not matter. At the bank, where we inquired about rates for an auto loan, the information was punched into a computer and the same rate was given to everyone.

For the bank loan, it didn't seem to make any difference, and yet if Dr. Patzer's theory is correct, presumably it would be easier to get a loan if you're better looking.

"And that offers us a glimmer of hope," says Dr. Patzer. "Where we're taking objective data, statistics and numbers, putting them into a computer program to get a decision, when we take it out of an individual's hands, it takes the differential treatment out of the equation.

Of course though, in life, we interact all the time with people who do, however unconsciously, make judgments about us based on what we look like.

So it does make a difference, and most likely always will, no matter what we try to do about it. But it doesn't hurt to know that next time we're drawn to one human being over another, that our reasons might not be quite as rational, nor even as fair, as we like to think they are.

In fact, Dr. Patzer says even justice is not blind to beauty. Studies have shown that juries find arguments more persuasive if they're made by attractive lawyers. But if beauty's in the eye of the beholder, getting 12 jurors to agree beyond a reasonable doubt on who's attractive could make for some long deliberations.

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