

Symposium Proposal

‘Lookism’ - the new form of employment discrimination?

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‘If you’re ugly, short or rude, your career prospects in the Chinese navy don’t look like plain sailing. Officials say anyone joining the service in 2006 must be good-looking, tall and polite.’ (BBC News 2006)

‘We want staff to have a clean, smart and tidy appearance. They are on public display and it is important they look reasonably well-presented so as not to put off the customers.’ (Bar manager statement at a UK employment tribunal after refusing a man employment because of his long hair, 2003)

Over the last two decades, analysis of the nature of work and employment in interactive service jobs has been dominated by the ‘emotional labour’ paradigm, with the focus on the possible stresses and strains associated with employees’ having to manage their own or customers feelings. Now, attention is being turned to ‘aesthetic labour’, recognising that it is not only employee feelings that organisations attempt to control but also employee appearance, and that this new managerial strategy can be potentially discriminatory (see for example Postrel 2003). Examining this potential new form of employment discrimination, this symposium will not only showcase leading edge collaborative research in the field but also provide opportunity to debate related future employment research as well as government and trade union policy agendas.

Aesthetic labour centres on employee looks, through which employers seek to differentiate themselves on competitive high streets. Moreover having an attractive or appropriate appearance is cast by employers in the Anglo-Saxon economies as a skill that is possessed or to be acquired by workers if these workers are to be employable. Research from the US and UK highlights links between an individual’s looks and his or her employment prospects (Hammermesh and Biddle 1994; Harper 2000 respectively). Especially in services, because employees interact with customers and physically embody the company, employee looks matter. As a consequence, service employers appear to be intentionally discriminating in favour of workers perceived to be either ‘good looking’ or who have the ‘right look’ and penalise those workers perceived as less physically attractive or appropriate (Nickson et al. 2005). This ‘lookism’ is being signalled as the next frontier in employment discrimination. As journalist Barbara Oaff stated bluntly in the *Guardian* in 2003; ‘If your gender and your race haven’t kept you off the short list, your physical appearance still might.’

The concept of aesthetic labour was developed by a team at Strathclyde University (see Warhurst et al. 2000) but a number of research teams across world are now examining aesthetic labour across different industries in different contexts. Although there is indication that ad hoc employment on the basis of looks is not new, as services have come to dominate the advanced economies, there is evidence now that this employment has become an intentional strategy on the part of employers and raises serious conceptual and empirical questions for researchers seeking to understand new forms of work and employment. For example, how important are employee looks during recruitment and selection? Is employee appearance really a skill? Can employee appearance be trained? Such questions in turn raise wider issues about what constitutes 'employability' and the potential for employment discrimination, and with which trade unions and some agencies concerned with equal opportunities are now beginning to grapple. New questions then arise. For example, are some workers being excluded from employment because they have a perceived 'skill deficit' regarding their appearance? Should lookism be tackled, and if so how?

This symposium explores these issues by drawing on the newly completed research of one international team of UK, Australian and Swedish academics. This research is at the leading edge of the field, not only exploring employer demand for and employee experience of aesthetic labour but, importantly, probing the wider employment implications in terms of skill formation and training as well as labour market discrimination and responses to that discrimination from government and trade unions.

The symposium will showcase this research programme. It first maps out the concept of aesthetic labour, signalling the key subsequent employment issues. It then drills down with detailed empirical examples of how these issues are manifest in service workplaces in different countries. It also presents findings from analysis of the operation and outcomes of the only state-led legislative attempt to outlaw lookism. Service sector trade union concerns about and responses to lookism are then outlined before an open roundtable discussion amongst academics and practitioners about future research and policy agendas focusing on lookism.

The symposium would last for 90 minutes. Each paper presentation would last for 15 minutes, with 10-15 minutes for the trade union response and then 15-20 minutes for roundtable discussion. All paper presenters have agreed to participate in the symposium and will be present in Sydney for the conference (see accompanying emails).

Proposed Symposium Format

‘Lookism’ - the new form of employment discrimination?

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This symposium explores the issue of ‘lookism’, or employment discrimination based on employee appearance. Conceptualised as ‘aesthetic labour’, the symposium first outlines the practice and maps out the implications of employment based on appearance. Drawing on recently completed, collaborative empirical research from three countries, the papers then outline how and why discrimination occurs on the basis of employee appearance in different countries and how one Australian state, Victoria, has tried to legislatively tackle this discrimination. Trade union concerns about and responses to lookism are then outlined before an open roundtable discussion amongst academics and practitioners about future research agendas focusing on lookism.

Paper 1 The origins and employment implications of aesthetic labour

Prof. Chris Warhurst, University of Strathclyde, UK

This paper outlines the origins and signals the employment implications of aesthetic labour, which refers to the employment of workers with certain capacities and attributes that favourably appeal to customers and which employers then develop through training and/or monitoring. In the media it has become translated as those people who are employed on the basis of ‘looking good’ and/or ‘sounding right’. Recognition that employers seek aesthetic labour raises a number of issues; some conceptual, others practical, but all extending understanding of service work and employment.

The paper first defines and outlines aesthetic labour in service jobs. The paper then signals some of the key issues that emerge from employer aesthetic labour demand – issues of skill and skill formation, training policy and provision, and the emergence of a new form of discrimination based on employee appearance – ‘lookism’. The paper concludes by arguing that there is a need to rethink not only research agendas in services but also the policy responses to aesthetic labour from government and trade unions.

Paper 2 The importance of looks to employers: findings from retail surveys in the UK and Australia

Dr Dennis Nickson and Dr Di van der Broek, Universities of Strathclyde and Sydney, UK and Australia

This paper focuses on the findings of two surveys from the UK and Australia of fashion retailers. It analyses the range of skills demanded by fashion retailers, particularly focusing on aesthetic labour and ‘aesthetic skills’ (Nickson et al. 2005).

While the concept of aesthetic labour has been used to describe the employment, development and deployment of physical and presentational attributes, it has been refined in subsequent research on fashion retail. Pettinger’s (2004) study identified distinctions driven by employer concerns with factors such as style, value and quality.

The paper recognises how labour may be aestheticised in different ways and how aesthetic labour is constituted differently depending on the market, strategy, location and character of the store and brand. These variations in turn impact on who is likely to be recruited to best represent the brand. The paper concludes by considering which employees are included or excluded in this recruitment process.

Paper 3 The use of aesthetics by employers as a proxy for determining employee well-being during recruitment: the case of Sweden

Dr Henrietta Huzell, Karlstad University, Sweden

Research on hospitality and retail companies in the UK finds that employees' looks are important and for some employers a conscious strategy intended to increase sales earnings - aesthetic labour (Nickson et al. 2005; Warhurst and Nickson 2007). Swedish research confirms this existence.

This paper extends the discussion by focusing on service employers perceptions of employee well-being. In the light of increased responsibility for sick benefits among Swedish employers, we divide aesthetic demands in four different concepts, of which health issues – what we label ‘athletic demands’ – is one. Athletic demands mean that employers want workers who are ‘fit’, ‘not overweight’ and in good ‘physical shape’.

We argue that the concept of athletic labour is driven by other mechanisms than aesthetic labour in general. By filtering in healthy looking workers during recruitment, employers seek to reduce costs related to employee absenteeism – not just increase sales. As a consequence, instead of improving poor working environments services employers try to filter out future risks of employee absence due to sickness using athletic demands as a proxy for employee well-being.

Paper 4: The legal regulation of ‘lookism’; evidence from Australia

Dr Richard Hall, University of Sydney, Australia

In the US and UK, trade unions and equal opportunity agencies typically use anti-sexism and racism legislation to combat worker claims of lookism (Warhurst et al. 2008). The Australian state of Victoria, however, has formally recognised the existence of lookism and, under the Victorian Equal Opportunity Act 1995, has made it unlawful to discriminate against employees because of their physical features. This paper reports the first analysis of the operation and outcomes of this legislation based on archival research of all ‘physical features’ cases brought to the Equal Opportunity Commission (Victoria) since 1995 plus interviews with EOC case managers and officers.

The findings contain some surprises: firstly that claims of lookism exist across all industries – services and manufacturing (though typically confined to the intermediate and lower occupations and so not managerial or professional workers); secondly that workers' claims are made against not just management but also other workers. These findings suggest wider practical and conceptual issues about current work and employment, respectively: lookism by management being more widespread than expected, and looks featuring in organisational misbehaviour amongst workers.

Comment: The trade union response

Gerard Dwyer, Assistant Secretary of the Shop, Distributive and Allied Employees Union of Australia [TBC]

To date, most research on aesthetic labour and lookism has focused on interactive services generally, and retail often specifically. This response will centre of the feasibility and desirability of trade union intervention to combat lookism, and suggest possible strategies to do so.

Roundtable Discussion: Future research: linking academic, practitioner and policy agendas.

Chair: Prof. Chris Warhurst

References

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