

# Is our preference for pretty people pure prejudice?

IT'S an uncomfortable truth that beautiful people make more money: in the US, attractive workers earn 10 per cent more than their less winsome colleagues. Although it is plausible that the "beauty premium" arises because we favour pretty people, it might be that ambitious employees spend more time on grooming, or that attractive people are more confident employees.

Now a study of a TV game show supports the prejudice hypothesis.

The effect is so strong that contestants often lost out on hundreds of euros because they made poor judgements about fellow players.

V. Bhaskar of University College London and colleagues analysed 69 episodes of *Shafte*, which aired on Dutch TV in 2002. At the end of a round, the highest-scoring player picks a contestant to eliminate. Although the least attractive players scored no worse in the show than others, they were twice as likely to be eliminated in the first round. The contestants did not seem to base their decision on other factors such as age or sex.

Contestants also confused attractiveness with cooperativeness. In the final round of *Shafte*, the

last two players vie for an accumulated pot of money. Each player must opt to share the prize or attempt to grab it all for themselves. If one player opts to grab while one opts to share, the grabber takes the lot. If both try to grab, they both leave empty-handed, so game theory dictates that the leading contestant should pick a fellow finalist who is likely to cooperate.

Even though attractiveness was found to have no bearing on cooperativeness, the leader often

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elected to play the final round with the most attractive of their remaining rivals. In 13 shows, these looks-based decisions even overrode a simple imperative to choose their highest-scoring rival, which would have led to an increase in the ultimate prize fund. In these cases, the prize was €350 lower than it could have been, on average.

Lab experiments have suggested that discrimination might explain the beauty premium, says Daniel Hamermesh at the University of Texas at Austin. But he says Bhaskar's work (submitted to *The Economic Journal*) is useful because it is based on real-world behaviour. "It's in all of us," he says. "We'd all rather have beautiful people around us." Jim Giles ●