

## **Case #5: Attractiveness discrimination in hiring**

The hiring process had come down to three candidates: Jamal, Tanya, and Darrell. Deliberations had been going on for three days for the teaching position and the committee was nowhere close to deciding whom to hire. The committee had to make a good choice. They were replacing a professor who had damaged the reputation of their program. His research had brought controversy to the university and he had been incredibly disagreeable to work with as a colleague. Worst of all, his students had hated him. The committee had to select someone who would win back the support of the students in the upcoming semester.

One of the committee members said, “Well I’m just going to say what everyone else is thinking: we can’t hire Darrell. The students will never take to him.” A murmur went through the room. “I hate to say it, but he’s just—how do I say this—visually unappealing.”

It was true. In the interviews for the position, all three candidates had been professional, friendly, and had shown strong potential in their research. But there was no denying that while Jamal and Tanya had been young and attractive, Darrell did not fall into that social category. He was in the same age range as Jamal and Tanya, but he was morbidly obese. His hair was clean but stringy. His face was pocked with boils and looked like it had been for some time.

“We are all most certainly not thinking that!” Another member of the committee piped up. “Darrell was nothing but professional in his appearance and I thought his research showed better potential than the other two candidates. Furthermore, I really enjoyed our conversations with him. The joke he told over dinner showed that he had a great sense of humor, too.” A couple of the people at the table nodded their heads. Darrell’s research had been popular with the committee. It was exciting in a way that would bring good press to the university.

There was a silence in the room for a few seconds. One of the committee members who had not spoken yet sat back in his chair. “The other two candidates also had a good sense of humor, I thought. I’m not sure that can be our deciding factor. And there’s one more thing to consider. While we all thought that Darrell’s teaching demonstration was on par with the other two candidates, the students, well, didn’t.” This was also true. Student evaluations collected after the teaching demonstration had been on average a point and a half lower than for the other two candidates, even though all three candidates had covered the same material in a dynamic manner. “We have to pay attention to these scores. For whatever reason—and I’m not saying it’s his appearance—students didn’t like Darrell as much. We have a hard decision ahead of us and we have to rule someone out. I think it has to be Darrell.”

Everyone on the committee knew that good looks were not a qualification for the position. But appealing to students was a qualification for the position, and it appeared

that attractiveness was unconsciously having an effect on students' evaluations of the teaching demonstration. Some people on the committee felt that this was enough of a factor to bring physical attractiveness into the picture. They also cited studies<sup>1</sup> that physically attractive people tended to enjoy more success than their less fortunate counterparts. Others argued strongly against this position, noting that candidates had no control over their basic physical attractiveness. They argued that bringing physical attractiveness into the process at all amounted to discrimination.

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<sup>1</sup> Timothy A. Judge, Charlice Hurst, and Lauren S. Simon. "Does It Pay to Be Smart, Attractive, or Confident (or All Three)? Relationships Among General Mental Ability, Physical Attractiveness, Core Self-Evaluations, and Income," *Journal of Applied Psychology*, Vol. 94, No. 3.