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s/Anne L. Woehling

Judging a Book By Its Cover:
How Cultural Perceptions of Dental Appearance Affect Employability in the United States

Michael¹ sat quietly across from me at the table. As I got out my notebook to take notes on our interview, he slouched in his chair and hung his head. I did not take this as rude, but more took it as a sign of unease with the situation. My peers and I introduced ourselves, and he slowly nodded and mumbled his name back at us. We had gotten connected to Michael through the directors of UIH Family Partners, a fatherhood program based in Trenton, NJ.² The goal of the organization is to help men operate optimally within their community via programs that link them with housing, employment, and life-skills education. The vast majority (74%) of clients has been incarcerated and turns to UIH to help rebuild their lives after being released from prison, although this is not the case for all clients.³ Michael fell in the latter category. After name introductions, we asked him to tell us a bit about his background, and why it was that he originally came to UIH for help. He stated

¹ Name changed to protect interlocutor's identity.

² UIH Family Partners paired with Community Based Learning Initiative of Princeton University in hopes of finding students to help prove the need for funding for dental care for the clients of the organization.

³ Karen Andrade-Mims. 2006. *UIH Family Partners: Empowering Men, Fathers, and Families to Achieve Self Sufficiency* [brochure]

that, although he was now 29, he'd been in and out of foster care for most of his childhood, and never experienced financial stability.⁴ He'd come to UIH seeking assistance finding employment. On paper, Michael is a prime candidate for many jobs—he has both a high school and college degree, as well as a clean criminal record. Yet, Michael expressed to us that finding work has historically been extremely difficult for him and he is currently unemployed. This fact seemed puzzling, as there was discordance between his qualifications and his present employment status. This discrepancy, though, started to become more understandable as the conversation progressed. When I asked him about his level of self-confidence, he included details of his difficult upbringing, but also talked about the aesthetics of his appearance, namely his teeth. Interestingly, I hadn't actually been able to see any of his teeth yet, as he'd been mumbling with essentially closed lips for the duration of the conversation—a mannerism I'd soon find out was intentional. He said his confidence was extremely low—"I have to have bad [mouth] surgery. I don't like to talk to people most of the time... I'm less confident about a lot of things in life. I don't like to talk [because of my bad teeth], let alone smile."⁵ It was then why I understood why his finding employment had been so difficult. Unfortunately, with no job, Michael has no insurance to cover said surgery and both the dental health problem and low self-esteem remain. Paradoxically, these two issues are more than likely the barriers to Michael's employment. It is not a novel

⁴ Interview at UIH - April 17, 2015

⁵ Ibid.

concept that one needs to exude confidence, as well as *physically look* (subjectively) reliable⁶, in order to succeed in a job interview.

The solution—the end to the vicious cycle in which Michael is caught—is actually pretty simple. If Michael can obtain dental care, both aforementioned problems are solved and his employability increases many-fold. What this takes, though, is money—money that neither Michael himself or UIH has. The remainder of this paper is aimed at both identifying the effects of oral hygiene on holistic body health, and further evidencing the relationship between physical (specifically, dental) appearance and employability. The ultimate goal of doing so is to clearly demonstrate the need for funding for dental care not just for Michael, but for the many individuals in similar situations. I argue that, while it may seem reductionist to attribute unemployment to lack of public dental care, the long-reaching effects of dental care that include both overall health and physical appearance are major role-players in determining employability. Any individual without such care, thus, is at a major disadvantage when it comes to finding work.

Many do not realize that “oral health implies much more than healthy teeth” and “the mouth is both a cause and a reflection of individual and population health and well-being.”⁷ This means that the risks posed by oral disease, such as untreated infection, decay, and gum disease are not contained to the oral cavity.⁸ Aside from the immense pain and putrid smell that can accompany such infection, poor oral

⁶ I will expand upon the role that these factors play in forming first-impressions in the latter half of this paper.

⁷ Donald Patrick, et al. 2006. "Reducing Oral Health Disparities: A Focus on Social and Cultural Determinants." *BMC Oral Health* 6 (Suppl 1):S4, accessed May 11, 2015. doi:10.1186/1472-6831-6-S1-S4.

⁸ Ibid.

health status has been linked to malfunction or chronic disease of major body organs, including the heart.⁹ Just as oral infection isn't contained to the mouth, chronic disease isn't contained to the physical body. It infiltrates every aspect of a person's life—it "becomes us."¹⁰ In current discussion of employability, it is obvious that those with chronic conditions are not able to fulfill occupation roles to the same degree as healthier applicants. Whether it be that physical indicators of risk factors (i.e. decaying teeth, abscesses in the mouth, noticeable smell, etc.) deter an employer from following through with the hiring process or poor health status causes an employed person to miss work or under-perform, those who are chronically *healthy* are much more desirable employees than those who are chronically *ill*. When one falls into the latter category and simultaneously cannot afford treatment for the oral disease causing the extraneous health complications, long-term unemployment is a likely consequence.

That oral health is necessary for holistic body health and holistic body health is necessary for employment with regards to physical ability to work is the first, and perhaps more tangible, piece of my argument about the relationship between dental health and employability. The latter half of my argument is about how "bad" teeth affect the ways in which one's physical appearance is perceived by others. I put bad in quotations here because adjectives used to describe appearance are subjective

⁹ K.J. Joshipura et al. 1996 "Poor Oral Health and Coronary Heart Disease." *Journal of Dental Research* 75 (9):1631, accessed May 11, 2015. doi: 10.1177/00220345960750090301.

¹⁰ S. Lochlann Jain, 2013. *Malignant: How Cancer Becomes Us*. 1 ed: University of California Press.

and culturally constructed.¹¹ Cultures generate notions of the “ideal”—the ideal family, the ideal sexuality, the ideal socio-economic status, the ideal *anything*. It is not uncommon for human beings to evaluate both themselves and others against the background of cultural notions of ideal, and this holds especially true in the context of physical appearance. The fact that the US cosmetic and cosmetic surgery industries generate billions of dollars annually is alone enough to show how highly Americans tend to regard physical appearance.¹² Anthropologists Erica Reischer and Kathryn Koo write about the significance of the cultural construction of ideal appearance from a two-pronged approach: “the body beautiful as an icon of social values, and, less benignly, as a mechanism of social power and control.”¹³ They argue that, “given this notion that the social situation is reproduced or ‘replicated’ through bodily symbols, the body is viewed metaphorically as a text that can be ‘read’ as a symbol or signifier of the social world that it inhabits.”¹⁴ Furthermore, Reischer and Koo contend that members of a culture are very quick to infer the meanings of physical appearance “almost instantaneously.”¹⁵ Therefore, it is reasonable to conclude that if one’s body does not align with cultural notions of normalcy and ideal, they may be quickly perceived by others as belonging to a subpar community—physical appearance, thus, becomes not just a physical description, but a marker of one’s identity as a human being.

¹¹ Erica Reischer, and Kathryn S. Koo. 2004. "The Body Beautiful: Symbolism and Agency in the Social World." *Annual Review of Anthropology* 33:297, accessed May 11, 2015. doi: 10.2307/25064855.

¹² Ibid, 298.

¹³ Ibid, 299.

¹⁴ Ibid, 300.

¹⁵ Ibid, 300.

In the current discussion of dental appearances, it is important to note that the relationship between one's smile and perception of overall appearance has been evidenced by numerous studies. In A 2003 study by Newton et al. published in the *International Journal of Prosthodontics*, 201 undergraduates were asked to evaluate the "social competence, intellectual ability, and psychological adjustment" of men in eight different photographs, with varying degrees of visible dental disease.¹⁶ Unsurprisingly, the study found that "in the absence of other information, the judgments an individual makes concerning the personal characteristics of others are influenced by dental appearance" because those with visible dental disease were more likely to be viewed as incompetent in the three categories of evaluation.¹⁷ This study in particular represented the type of "blank-slate" relationship between evaluator and evaluatee that is present in job interviews. Thus, when one applies the results of this study to a job interview context, it is reasonable to deduce that interviewers likely draw conclusions about the interviewee based on their visible dental status. If such status is in poor condition, the interviewee is at a disadvantage before the interview even begins.

However, poor dental appearance does not only affect third party evaluator perceptions of a person, but also personal perceptions of the self as well. Poor dental appearance adversely affects "daily life activities" as it produces low self

¹⁶ J. T. Newton et al. 2003. "The impact of dental appearance on the appraisal of personal characteristics." *Int J Prosthodont* 16 (4):429, accessed May 11, 2015.

¹⁷ *Ibid*, 429.

esteem and negative self-thought.¹⁸ Consequences such as these can easily come across in a job interview, where one is being evaluated on how he or she carries oneself.

Returning to the case of Michael, his unemployment is not as big of a mystery after evaluating the major, far-reaching effects that dental health can have on one's life. In discussion, we saw that poor dental health has adverse effects on general health, as well as adverse effects on self and third party perception of one's physical appearance.

As evidenced by scientific studies of correlation between oral health and overall health, it is likely that a person with long-lasting dental infection has other general health problems, too. By default and to no surprise, one who is generally unhealthy is not desirable in the workforce. The fact that oral infection can be outwardly visible further compounds its negative effects on employability.

Furthermore, we saw that the appearance of the physical body is so important to how one is perceived by oneself and others because, not only does culture construct ideal notions of physical attractiveness, but deviance from this ideal can reflect negatively on an individual. Therefore, poor dental appearance can hurt an interview before it even begins because the evaluator may draw conclusions about the applicant based on physical "abnormality." I place abnormality in quotations because it is a subjective adjective—one that is fluid based on cultural conceptions of "normal."

¹⁸ Sietze P. Oosterhaven, et al. 1989. "Perception and significance of dental appearance: the case of missing teeth." *Community Dentistry and Oral Epidemiology* 17 (3):123. accessed May 11, 2015. doi: 10.1111/j.1600-0528.1989.tb00004.x.

The benefits of optimal dental health are undeniable. Unfortunately, there are hundreds of thousands of Americans without access to any sort of dental care. Michael himself had only visited the dentist five times in his 29 years of life. His case is not unique. The relationship between employability and dental care is a cyclical paradox—inability to pay for dental care creates a barrier to employment, which further exasperates such inability to pay. Federal funding for those who cannot afford dental care needs be provided so that, eventually, these individuals *will* be able to afford it on their own.

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