

# Hair Color Stereotyping and CEO Selection in the United Kingdom

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**ABSTRACT.** Hair color stereotyping is well documented in jokes and the psychological literature. Blondes are stereotyped as incompetent, but likeable, while redheads are seen as competent but cold, or often with a fiery temper. Do these stereotypes affect job progression, mobility, and the rise to the corporate suite? To test this question, the hair color of CEOs of the top 500 members of the London Financial Times Stock Exchange (FTE) was analyzed. The chi-square analysis supports the preconceived hair color stereotypes. Do the stereotypes and results point to discrimination in lower organizational ranks? The article discusses the possible implications of these findings as well as areas for further research. [Article copies available for a fee from The Haworth Document Delivery Service: 1-800-HAWORTH. E-mail address: <docdelivery@haworthpress.com> Website: <<http://www.HaworthPress.com>> © 2006 by The Haworth Press, Inc. All rights reserved.]

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When one hears the ubiquitous “dumb blonde” joke, like “*Why did the blonde stare at the orange juice box? Because it said concentrate,*” how often does the recipient of the joke imagine a dumb blonde *male*? A recent informal search for “dumb blonde” jokes in numerous published joke books and from an extensive Internet search revealed over 500 different “dumb blonde” jokes. Approximately 63% of the joke pool made specific reference to dumb blonde females, while less than 5% made reference to dumb blonde men. The remaining 32% of the dumb blonde jokes were deemed gender neutral highlighting neither men nor women.

It is not surprising the majority of the jokes are about the stereotypical dumb blonde female, however, the fact that approximately one third was gender neutral (a male could have been the subject of the joke) was surprising as was the fact some dumb blonde jokes specifically targeted men. As an example:

*There were two blonde guys working for the city council. One would dig a hole; the other would follow behind him and fill the hole in. They worked furiously all day without rest, one guy digging a hole, the other guy filling it in again. An onlooker was amazed at their hard work, but couldn't understand what they were doing. He asked the hole digger, "I appreciate the effort you're putting into your work, but what's the story? You dig a hole and your partner follows behind and fills it up again." The hole digger wiped his brow and sighed, "Well, normally we're a three-man team, but the guy who plants the trees is sick today."*

The purpose of this study is to explore the relationship between hair color bias and CEO selection. The study further suggests, based upon substantial theoretical support from the social/psychological literature, such biases do exist in today's business world. If these stereotypes of blondes and blonde men in particular exist, do they carry over into the workplace? For example, does hair color bias affect how managers judge the competency of employees and in particular their competency for leadership at the upper management ranks?

Do hair color stereotypes represent one of many unconsciously enacted barriers to managerial success, in addition to racial and gender

stereotypes which are well understood and documented? Do the stereotypes validate the theory of ambivalent stereotyping?

The London Financial Times Stock Exchange (FTSE) top 500 companies by market capitalization were selected as the database for analysis. The United Kingdom's sample was selected for a number of reasons. First, there is a long history of racial diversity in the corporate environment in the United Kingdom as well as pressure to increase both the recruitment and retention of ethnic minorities as well as to end age and gender discrimination (Hills, 2004; Basit & McNamara, 2004; Sassi, Carrier, & Weinberg, 2004; and Kenney, 2004) in addition to numerous studies on gender and racial stereotyping and their effect on employment success in the U.K. (Field, 1987; Green 1997; Iganski, Payne, & Robert, 2001; Model, 1999; Perotin, Robinson, & Loundes, 2003; Bagshaw, 2004; and Perotin & Robinson, 2000).

### ***CEO SELECTION FACTORS***

Since the 1980s, research on leadership has concentrated on personal attributes considered essential for success as the Chief Executive Officer of a large corporation (Ocasio & Kim, 1999). The traits most associated with successful CEOs assume their leadership style to be based on a set of competencies relating to the operation of a business and the management of its employees. These traits include leadership abilities, high levels of education and training, political savvy, and functional expertise (financial, marketing, or operational). These requirements all describe a certain competency or working knowledge required for performance at high levels (Cooper, 2000; and Jordan & Schrader, 2003).

Still other competencies include creativity, innovation, continual learning, flexibility, strategic thinking, vision, conflict management skills, integrity, decisiveness, problem-solving skills, technical credibility, human resource management expertise, influencing, and negotiating, to name a few (Jordan & Schrader, 2003). Interestingly these competencies are not personality traits related to being likeable but traits linked to specific job performance skills and activities. Thus, competency is cited most often as a critical factor determining a CEO's business success. But are these competencies objectively measured during the lifelong career of the CEO as they climb the corporate ladder? Or, could it be as the CEO-to-be develops a reputation for being competent, this reputation creates a halo effect?

Research on CEO selection indicates executives with financial backgrounds were successful in gaining control of the highest levels of corporate power as far back as the 1960s (Hayes & Abernathy, 1980). This rise of finance personnel, it is argued, led to a transformation in corporate governance, reflected a strong financial bias, and shaped corporations around the world for decades to come (Ocasio & Kim, 1999). But the decade of the 1980s saw the destruction of corporate institutions as the finance empires began to crumble. Mergers, acquisitions, leveraged buy-outs, restructurings, bankruptcies, and hostile takeovers were commonplace. What emerged from this chaotic period in corporate governance was the importance of the role of the CEO as a leader, a catalyst for change, and a strategic visionary. During this time, leadership research grew and CEO selection became a hotly contested topic in management research (Paul, Costley, Howell, & Dorfman, 2002; Judge, Bono, Ilies, & Gerhardt, 2002).

Are traits the key determinants of mobility or are stereotypes involved? Specifically does hair color bias affect the perception of CEOs as a competent leader and if so, does it affect their selection? In effect, are blonde managers less likely to become CEO merely because the presence of blonde hair is considered to reflect incompetence? Discrimination or bias based on skin color and ethnicity is widely documented and legally prohibited. Does hair color bias represent another form of “color” discrimination? In order to answer this question, this study explores the recent research on stereotyping bias, which challenges the long held assumption—stereotypes are role based, not content based. In addition, this study postulates because the nature of stereotyping of blonde hair is one of incompetence, bias against blonde male managers does exist. We discuss the implications of this bias and recommend areas for future research.

### ***Stereotyping Theories***

Bargh (1999) in his examination of stereotypes found stereotypes are not under motivational control as Neuberg (1989, 1994) found, but they are uncontrollable and the result of unconscious action. Bargh (1999) further argues the evidence of controllability is weaker and more problematic than previously realized. Glick, Fiske, Xu, and Cuddy (1999) in their groundbreaking study challenged the long held assumption stereotypes were largely role based, grounded in historical roles and embedded in the human psyche from generations of historical story telling. They hypothesized and later discovered an arbitrary dynamic exists

within all stereotyped groups, regardless of their historical foundation. These manifested as two complementary images recurring across a variety of outgroups, namely, competent but cold (unlikable) versus incompetent but warm (likeable). The authors suggest these two dimensions underlie many stereotypes and are mutually exclusive when applied to a stereotyped group. As a result, stereotypes are more ambivalent than typically considered. Moreover, social structural variables predict which groups will be viewed as competent and which will be viewed as warm.

Asch's (1946) earliest research on perceptions of an individual contrasted a warm, competent person with a cold competent person. His research revealed the meaning of intelligence differed in a warm (wise) individual and in a cold (sly) individual. Zannah and Hamilton (1997) expanded on this early research by showing the single trait representing warmth (cold) carried more significant meaning. They argue stereotypic content results from structural relationships between groups (rather than from societal roles). Specifically, two groups, (1) competent and cold and (2) incompetent and warm, represent the social structural foundation for stereotyping. Thus people envy and respect high-status groups (wealthy people) but do not like them and people disrespect low-status groups (maids, people with disabilities) for their incompetence but may like them. Also, they argue twin dimensions of liking and respect operate reciprocally, i.e., groups are high on one and or the other but not on both at once.

In studies on stereotyping (Glick, Fiske, Xu, & Cuddy, 1999; Asch, 1946), the traits consistently linked with competency included intelligence, confidence, competitiveness, and independence. The traits linked with warmth (likeable) were, sincerity, being good-natured, warmth, and tolerance. They ranked six groups to be significantly more competent than warm (from highest to lowest): rich people, feminists, business women, Asians, Jews, and Northerners. They found seven groups to be consistently more warm than competent: learning disabled people, housewives, disabled people, blind people, house cleaners, migrant workers, and welfare recipients. This paper extends this framework of stereotyping to include groups based on hair color along with perceptions forming around hair color.

Specifically, it is argued blondes tend to be stereotyped as incompetent and therefore may be more liked (popular). Redheads on the other hand tend to be stereotyped as not likeable (cold) and therefore are considered competent. We argue, because of this underlying tendency to dichotomize the two groups as competent and cold (redheads) and in-

competent and warm (blondes), managers and executives will tend to promote the redheads over blondes. Other hair colors (brown, black) do not share these stereotypes.

### *A Hair Color Bias?*

Bias or identifiable stereotypes are developed largely to make sense of outliers or things, people, or practices different from the mean (Roll and Verinis, 1971). They are formulaic oversimplifications of concepts, opinions, or images. Stereotyped groups or individuals are attributed as embodying or conforming to a set image or type. Social groups formulate stereotypes as a by-product of labels given to out-groups. Stereotypes are almost always developed for "out" groups. People who share our same attributes or beliefs are typically never labeled. Cambell (1967) and Levine and Cambell (1972) suggest racial stereotypes result from work roles. Physical laborers are characterized as strong and stupid and pleasure loving, resembling animals and their evils are characterized as sins of the flesh. Entrepreneurs, on the other hand, are classified as grasping, deceitful, clever, and domineering and inhabiting the sphere of commerce with its materialistic sins.

Stereotypes emerge out of groups' relative status and their structural independence. Status predicts perceived competence and interdependence predicts perceived warmth. For example, one envies and respects high status groups for their competency but does not like them. One disrespects low status groups for their incompetence but one may like them as they fulfill roles the dominant group needs (Glick & Fisk, 1999). According to Synnot (1987), hair is perhaps the most powerful symbol of individual and group identity—powerful first because it is physical and therefore extremely personal and second because, although personal, it is also public.

Synnot (1987) further argues stereotyping permeates cultural beliefs, as is evidenced by dumb blonde jokes. In her 1992 study, she found redheads to be categorized as active, no-nonsense executive types while blondes were found to be attractive and happy. Hair color, although appearing to be an innocuous physical trait, remains a solid basis for stereotyping.

*Blondes: Incompetent and Likeable.* In their 1986 study on blonde and red haired males, Clayson and Maughan found blond males perceived to be strong, active, and pleasant in demeanor. Their likeability was considered to be much higher than their redhead counterparts. In a recent study conducted in Germany of 50 subjects with learning disabil-

ities, 10 subjects (20%) were blonde. In contrast, in the same study only 121 of 1,067 subjects without learning disabilities were blond (11%). Subjects with learning disabilities were nearly twice as likely to be blond compared with non-learning disabled subjects. These results raise the possibility melanin may be involved both in the development of motor dominance and independently in the development of neural systems which, when maldeveloped, result in learning disabilities (Schachter, Ransel & Geschwind, 1987).

*Redheads: Not Likeable and Competent.* According to Cooper (1971) blonde hair traditionally is appealing, brunette hair lacks any distinctive positive or negative attributes, but red hair has “blazed an erratic trail.” In a study by Feinman and Gill (1978) in which they examined “likes and dislikes” preferences of opposites based upon physical attributes, they found over 80% expressed a dislike for people with red hair. In the same study, the skin color of most redheads was the most disliked of the eight skin colors. In their study they asked the research question, “Why is there such an aversion to redheads?”

Clayson and Maughn (1986) attempted to answer this question, finding redheaded females to be unlikable but competent, while redheaded males were found to be unattractive and unsuccessful. They concluded redheads may be stereotyped negatively because they are rare. Heckert and Best agreed (1997), arguing red hair has been stigmatized in part because it is rare (and therefore threatening as extreme in its deviation from the norm) representing only 1% of the population. This stigma decreases the attractiveness value of people with red hair, resulting in low likeability scores. It is argued (Glick et al., 1999) these low likeability scores result in the ambivalent ascription of “competent.”

Thus, redheads may not be likeable, but it is the very nature of their un-likeability which results in their being labeled competent (Glick et al., 1999). This leads to our research question: Does hair color stereotyping affect selection bias in the workplace? Are CEOs with blonde hair underrepresented as compared to the percentage of people with blonde hair in the overall U.K. population (currently at 25% based on expert opinion and data from the World Health Organization and CIA Fact Book)? Are CEOs with red hair overrepresented, as compared to the percentage of redheads in the UK population (currently at 1%)?

### ***Methodology***

While this research is exploratory in nature, it does address the possibility of stereotyping based on hair color within the top ranks of the

U.K. executive suite. The results should be important to a number of groups including human resources managers, selection committees, boards of directors and other top governance groups, shareholders, and other stakeholders. Manufacturers of hair color, dyes, hair dressers, salons, and other sellers and applicators of such products would be interested as well. Hair coloring products usage by men, in particular, is increasing. This has been largely attributable to the tight economic climate and job market and the need for a younger image (not gray) to secure employment. Approximately one in eight American males between the ages of 13-70 dyes their hair. This has doubled from ten years ago and the percentage is expected to grow in the future (Brown, 1996). With the results of this research, the color choices, particularly for the upwardly mobile executive may change, not only in the U.K., but in Europe and other multicultural settings.

Our unconscious processes may preclude us from selecting someone for the top management position based solely on their hair color, even when other quantifiable measures of leadership and leadership potential exist and have been validated by prior business research. Even with performance management processes, leadership trait theories, leadership assessment centers, management development programs, and outward bound CEO training courses; in the end it could be hair color that determines CEO selection.

While the methodology is exploratory, the sample used for the research is well validated and is the 2004 FTSE listing of companies ([www.londonstockexchange.com](http://www.londonstockexchange.com)). Using annual reports for the fiscal year 2003-2004 and photographs from [www.ceo.com](http://www.ceo.com) as well as [www.google.com](http://www.google.com) and [www.soople.com](http://www.soople.com) image searches, the photos of CEOs were examined to determine hair color. The CEOs were categorized as blonde, red heads, black hair, or brunette. In bald or gray-haired CEOs, past photos were gathered from annual reports or the researchers called or e-mailed the company's human resource department to determine the original color of the CEO's hair.

Of the 500 CEOs, 25 (5%) had blonde hair, 20 (4%) had red hair. There were 114 CEOs with black hair (22.8%) and 341 (68.2%) with brown hair. Of the 500 UK CEOs, only two were female and both had brown hair. They were included in the sample. There was no minority CEOs. These findings were compared to normal population statistics on natural hair color provided by the CIA Fact Book ([www.cia.gov](http://www.cia.gov)), and supported by further research (Snee, 1974) on hair color and eye color distributions. In the U.K. population inclusive, it is estimated 25 percent of the

population is natural blonde, 68 percent is natural brunette (brown), one percent is redhead, and six percent have black hair.

### ***Findings***

Of the 500 CEOs analyzed, 5% were blondes and 4% had red hair. Given that within the U.K. population, approximately 25% has blonde hair and 1% has red hair, are our findings statistically different than expected? Given these U.K. hair color statistics, in our CEO sample one would expect to see 100 blonde CEOs (or 20% of the group) and find 5 (1%) CEOs with red hair. To test the hypothesis—Is the distribution of hair color of the FTSE CEOs the same as the distribution of hair color in the U.K. population?—a Chi-Square statistical goodness-of-fit test was computed. The P-value for the statistical test was zero indicating the two populations in fact, have significantly different distributions as shown in Table 1.

## ***FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION***

As would be expected from the literature review, blondes, who are viewed historically as incompetent and likeable, were *underrepresented* in positions of corporate leadership in the UK. Redheads, while a miniscule number in the U.K. population, were *over selected* to lead some of the United Kingdom's (and Europe's) largest, wealthiest companies. Stereotypically this would be expected as redheads are perceived to be competent, though not particularly likeable. Overall, brown or black hair is the predominant (and seemingly preferred) hair color of

TABLE 1. Chi-Square Goodness-of-Fit Test

Hair Color	Actual Hair Color	Hair Color Expected Based on U.K. Population Percentages	(A-E) <sup>2</sup> /E
Blonde	25	100	56.25
Red	20	5	45.00
Black or Brown	455	395	9.113924051
Total	500	500	

Test-Statistic 110.3639241

P-value 1.08337E-24 or almost 0 with 2 df

CEOs in the FTSE top 500. As previously noted, hair color stereotypes are not directed to black or brown hair as these two hair colors represents the majority in the U.K. Our findings are consistent with the view blondes are characterized as more likeable and possibly less competent.

This stereotype of incompetence, by definition, affects the status of blondes in society and in particular in the workplace. One may conclude if a stereotype operates to label a group as incompetent, it also restricts their ability to raise their status in the corporate hierarchy. Thus, negative stereotyping of hair color does appear to affect placement into leadership positions, particularly at the CEO level. The dumb blonde myth then is not a myth. Perception becomes reality and the pattern perpetuates. By having an awareness of the issue, further investigation into the stereotyping is important and warranted. While the research indicated stereotyping is unconscious, moving such awareness to instruments including job screening forms could help counter such seemingly discriminatory actions and possibly minimize the stereotype.

Should hair color be included in the anti-discrimination legislation? If selection of CEOs is partly based on hair color as this sample indicates, does it constitute a form of discrimination? If so, is it covert? In the U.S., for example, color as currently defined in Title VII (statutory basis for non-discrimination in employment) refers to the shade of a person's skin and not race alone, because within a race, a variety of skin colors can exist. The U.K. and the world in general often biased toward lighter colored skin tones. While most discrimination laws currently refer to skin color, should they also include hair color?

### *Limitations and Areas for Future Research*

This study is exploratory. It is limited and uses a U.K. sample of the FTSE 500 companies. In addition, the FTSE 500 CEOs do not accurately represent the U.K. population as a whole for either gender or race distributions. According to the CIA Fact Book ([www.cia.gov](http://www.cia.gov)), the U.K. population is 85.1% English, 9.6% Scottish, 2.4% Irish, 1.9% Welsh, 1.8% Ulster, and 2.8% other which includes West Indian, Indian, and Pakistani. When considering gender ratios for the U.K. population age 15-64, there are 20,193,876 males and 19,736,516 females so there is approximately is 1.02 males in the U.K. for every one female or almost a 50/50 ratio. These demographics were not similarly distributed in the group of executives profiled as only two CEOs (0.4%) are women (where 49.4% would be normally expected in the U.K. population) and there were no minority CEOs and 3% minority representation would be

expected in a random U.K. population sample. A larger sample size should include women and minorities in other leadership roles to test whether the stereotype holds equally for both genders. A larger sample of respondents including other levels of top management is also needed. Hair color should also be correlated with other leadership and managerial traits to determine if additional correlations exist.

While the purpose of this study is to highlight the discrepancy as possible evidence of the power of hair color stereotyping, we acknowledge there are many factors for which we do not control. Future research should address the limitations of this research and control for other factors that may lead to discrimination of some type as well as validate the presence of stereotypes in the top management ranks. In addition a lab study dealing with perceptions of hair color linked to resumes is needed to validate the importance of this research stream.

Research with entrepreneurs is needed to assess whether hair color patterns differ from these findings. If so, did individuals leave the corporate world due to mobility challenges? Including more levels of management, particularly at the vice-president and corporate board of director levels are needed to further explore these research postulates. Also research is needed to determine if such hair color stereotyping violates the U.K. Race Relations Act of 1976 which prevents both direct and indirect discrimination as well as victimization.

An international, global sample should examine predominantly blonde cultures of Germany and Sweden to see what leadership differences and stereotypes exist as well as research in the predominantly non-blond cultures of Asia including China, Japan, and India. This international research should address other cultural stereotypes of hair color and covert discrimination issues since research agrees European and Asian companies look to their own to fill the CEO chairs (Hymowitz, 2004).

Finally, further research should test the arguments with other job categories within organizations, particularly divisional or functional level leadership positions. This research could be used to predict who is promoted within organizations. Still other research should correlate hair color with other traits of individuals including job title plus height, weight, age, gender. This research can also determine which groups are likeable and competent versus which groups are stereotyped as likeable and not competent. Such research can raise awareness of hair color stereotypes in hopes of changing ingrained misperceptions.

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