

What's wrong with everyday lookism?

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journals.sagepub.com/home/ppe**Andrew Mason***University of Warwick, UK*

Abstract

Everyday lookism, by which I mean the widespread practice of commenting upon and judging the appearance of others, is often regarded as morally troubling. But when, and why, is it morally problematic? I argue that in many cases everyday lookism is wrongful because it involves morally objectionable appearance discrimination. I consider various respects in which everyday lookism can be morally objectionable in virtue of the acts of wrongful discrimination it involves. I argue that these acts are wrongful when they are demeaning, or when they have unjust consequences whether singly or cumulatively. There are a number of ways in which they may have unjust consequences. First, the appearance norms in which these acts are rooted may be biased in such a way that the acts contribute to creating an unjust distribution of benefits and burdens. Second, these acts may combine to make everyday lookism oppressive in virtue of impairing the personal autonomy of its victims or contributing to doing so. Third, these acts may be unjustly harmful in terms of their effects.

Keywords

everyday lookism, discrimination, appearance, oppression, social norms, beauty ideals

Everyday lookism, by which I mean the widespread practice of commenting upon and judging the appearance of others, is often regarded as morally troubling.¹ It occurs in various contexts, including on social media where it is commonplace to make remarks about the appearance of others. It is fuelled by demanding appearance norms that spell out the standards that need to be met to be presentable to others and to look beautiful. Heather Widdows documents the way in which exacting norms relating to youthfulness,

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slimness, absence of body hair, skin texture, and firmness of flesh govern the appearance of women, and she illustrates the way in which increasingly men too are subject to norms that are comparable in terms of their demandingness (Widdows, 2018: 19–26, 54–60, 236–243).

In Widdows's view, these appearance norms have come to form an ethical ideal that exerts pressure not only on people who accept it but also those who reject it.² Even though this ideal can be combined with a range of different conceptions of what gives value and meaning to our lives (for example, it is perfectly consistent with valuing artistic creativity or enjoying wilderness adventures), when a person endorses it, then it shapes and constrains her conception of how to live. Those who don't comply with the relevant norms, irrespective of whether they endorse them, are subject to disapproval of a kind that is not merely aesthetic but takes the form of ethical or moral criticism. Women especially are often subjected to criticism that is ethical or moral in tone for not making the best of themselves, or for letting themselves go, in a way that implies they have failed in their duty to themselves, and perhaps even to others, to take care of their appearance. Furthermore, both men and women (and indeed boys and girls) are shamed for being overweight, and are regarded as self-indulgent or lacking in self-control for failing to achieve what may be for them an unattainable standard of thinness.

Widdows's account of the ideal of beauty that fuels everyday lookism is illuminating. But when, and why, is everyday lookism morally problematic? I hope to cast some light on this issue. I argue that in many cases everyday lookism is wrongful because it involves morally objectionable discrimination. This might seem to over-stretch the concept of discrimination – we don't immediately think of this practice as discriminatory – but in so far as it involves singling out individuals and treating them unfavourably on the basis of their personal characteristics or it has a worse effect on members of some disadvantaged group, it falls within the bounds of an intuitive understanding of the notion.³ Even those who resist the idea that everyday lookism involves appearance discrimination should concede that the acts that constitute it are sufficiently similar to discrimination that theories of what makes discrimination wrong (when it is wrong) are relevant to evaluating it from a moral point of view.⁴

I shall consider various respects in which everyday lookism can be morally objectionable in virtue of the acts of wrongful discrimination it involves. I argue that these acts are wrongful when they are demeaning, or when they have unjust consequences whether singly or cumulatively.⁵ There are a number of ways in which they may have unjust consequences. First, the appearance norms in which these acts are rooted may be biased against various groups in such a way that the acts contribute to creating an unjust distribution of benefits and burdens. Second, these acts may combine to make everyday lookism oppressive in virtue of impairing the personal autonomy of its victims or contributing to doing so. Third, these acts may be unjustly harmful in terms of their effects. I do not claim that my account captures all of the ways in which the acts of discrimination involved in everyday lookism may be wrongful, but I hope to have identified the main ones. Nor do I claim that commenting upon the appearance of others is always wrongful. Indeed it may express a genuine concern for their well-being or be a permissible form of aesthetic criticism. Whether it is wrongful depends partly on its meaning in the context in which it takes place and partly on its effects.

In addressing these issues, I shall regard an appearance norm as an informal rule concerning how one should look that is generally endorsed or, at least, generally followed within a society or a group.⁶ I shall treat the costs of compliance with an appearance norm, such as the time, effort, and use of resources involved in doing so, and the costs of non-compliance, such as the disapproval or moral criticism to which non-compliers are subjected and the feelings of guilt or shame they experience, as extrinsic to the norm rather than constitutive of it.⁷ In some but not all cases, the content of an appearance norm is central to explaining why the everyday lookism it fuels is morally objectionable. When the discrimination involved in everyday lookism is demeaning, the content of appearance norms plays a key role in explaining why it is wrongful, but when it is objectionable because it is oppressive or harmful, then the content of these norms is less important in explaining its wrongfulness than the costs of compliance and non-compliance with the norms. In cases when the discrimination is wrongful because it is shaped by biased norms, then both the content of these norms and the costs of compliance and non-compliance with them play a crucial role in explaining its wrongfulness.

The acts of discrimination shaped by appearance norms may be either contingently wrong, that is, wrong in virtue of their causal effects, or non-contingently wrong, that is, wrong independently of their causal effects. Note that it is conceptually possible for an act to be non-contingently wrong without being *intrinsically* wrong. An act is non-contingently wrong if and only if it is wrong independently of its causal consequences, whereas it is intrinsically wrong if and only if it is wrong solely in virtue of its intrinsic or constitutive properties, that is, properties that it has independently of its relationships with other things. It is therefore conceptually possible for an act to be non-contingently but extrinsically wrong, for example, an act might be non-contingently wrong in virtue of the disrespect it involves, but its disrespectfulness, and therefore its wrongness, may depend upon the social meaning given to acts of that kind.

Demeaning comments

Everyday lookism may be morally objectionable because it is demeaning. The appearance norms that fuel it, and the context in which it takes place, may be such that it sends out a message that those to whom these norms apply, or those who fail to comply with these norms, are morally deficient. The idea that everyday lookism may be demeaning in this way can be developed by drawing upon Deborah Hellman's account of what makes discrimination wrong when it is wrong. She in effect argues that discrimination is non-contingently wrong when it demeans the victims of it, where '[t]o demean is to treat another as not fully human or not of equal moral worth' (Hellman, 2008: 35).⁸ A person can treat others as if they lack equal worth without intending to do so, and indeed without believing that they have less moral value, by discriminating against them in a way that, under the circumstances, expresses the attitude, or conveys the message, that they are inferior. Moreover, this can happen without the victims, or indeed any bystanders, regarding the behaviour as demeaning. The idea that everyday lookism is sometimes demeaning can be unpacked further by employing the notion of *recognition* respect (Darwall, 1977: 36–49). Everyday lookism can fail to give recognition respect to some or all of its victims because it does not give appropriate weight to their standing as

persons, in particular the value that they each have in virtue of their possession of the capacity (to some adequate level) to live their lives in their own way. It does so by failing to take into account the attitudes it expresses, or the message it conveys, in the particular social and historical context in which it takes place (Eidelson, 2015: Ch. 3).

Hellman maintains that in order to demean another person, you need to have sufficient power over her to be able to put her down or subordinate her through your actions. Given the power that men may possess over women, and the history of unjust treatment to which women have been subject, it would seem that everyday lookism can be demeaning in virtue of sending out a message about the inferiority of women, such as the message that women are *mere* objects of male sexual desire. When men make comments to women about their appearance in a way that is sexualised, then this seems to be demeaning in a society in which women have been treated as objects for men's sexual use, for it may objectify women by reducing them to their bodies or body parts.⁹ So too women who are ridiculed for not removing body hair, and who are regarded as disgusting or dirty for letting it grow naturally, may be demeaned as a result of the attention it receives. More generally, everyday lookism fuelled by appearance norms that cast women as more superficial than men in virtue of the greater significance women are expected to attach to their appearance might be thought to treat women as having an inferior moral status (Bartky, 1997: 102).

It is not easy, however, to find clear cases of demeaning discrimination rooted in appearance norms that do not involve some other kind of discrimination as well, such as (in the examples given) gender discrimination. But one potential class of cases involves the practice of 'fat shaming', which seems to denigrate people regarded as seriously overweight. In a society in which people who are regarded as obese are treated not merely as aesthetically unappealing but as morally flawed because they are seen as lazy or lacking in self-control, they may become stigmatised, that is, marked out as inferior. When this happens, fat shaming is objectionable in part because it sends out the message that people who are obese are morally inferior. Another potential class of cases concerns facial disfigurements. Even when people with facial disfigurements are not the objects of prejudice, the non-rational reactions of others to their appearance, such as recoiling in shock or staring, may mark them out as inferior, with the consequence that negative comments about their appearance may be demeaning.

Even though it is hard to demean someone over whom you lack power, is it impossible to do so? It might be thought that fat shaming is one way in which the less powerful can sometimes demean the more powerful. Consider, for example, employees joking about the size of their boss. Hellman might resist the idea that their behaviour could be demeaning. She wants to distinguish between mere disrespect, which may take the form of insults, and demeaning behaviour properly so-called (Hellman, 2008: 29, 36). Only the latter puts a person down in the relevant sense since merely disrespectful behaviour does not amount to treating a person as if they lacked equal moral worth. The difference between merely disrespectful and demeaning behaviour may lie not in the content of what is said but merely in the power relations that obtain. But even if fat shaming is demeaning only if the person who engages in it has power over the victim, that may not require the victim to be a member of *some other* disadvantaged group. For it may be that those regarded as obese are themselves a stigmatised group as a result of prejudices that

are held about them and the treatment they receive, and that as a consequence a slim person may possess sufficient power to demean a man who is obese even when she has less power along other dimensions, for example, when she is a female employee and he is the boss.

Identifying the message conveyed by an act of discrimination involves interpreting the meaning of the act in the light of the past and present treatment of the group or groups to which the victims belong (Hellman, 2008: Ch. 3). It might therefore be thought that when everyday lookism is wrong in virtue of acts of discrimination that are demeaning, then it must be contingently wrong since its wrongfulness depends upon the context in which these acts take place (Eidelson, 2015: 74). But here we can make use of the distinction between claiming that an act is non-contingently wrong and maintaining that it is intrinsically wrong. If an act of discrimination is wrong in virtue of the demeaning message it conveys, then that would seem to make it extrinsically rather than intrinsically wrong, since its wrongfulness depends on the social and historical context in which it takes place. However, it would nevertheless be non-contingently wrong since its wrongfulness is independent of its *causal* consequences, because the message conveyed by the act does not depend upon that message being received or even understood by those who comply with the norm – those who are demeaned need not *feel* demeaned – or by those who participate in the practice of which it is part.

Biased appearance norms

Everyday lookism might seem wrongful when the appearance norms that shape it are biased against particular groups and it is costly not to comply with these norms. Consider two types of appearance norm that are biased in this way. First, norms that are gender-biased because they are harder or more costly for one gender to comply with compared to the other.¹⁰ These include gender-specific norms that make demands on one gender but not the other (for example, a norm compliance with which requires women but not men to wear makeup, or a norm that excludes men but not women from wearing makeup), and gender-differentiated norms that make greater demands in various respects on one gender compared to the other (for example, norms governing weight, which require women to be thinner compared to men, and norms governing the wearing of brightly coloured clothing, which are more restrictive for men). When everyday lookism involves discrimination that is influenced by these norms, then it constitutes direct discrimination on the basis of gender. Second, norms that are racially-biased because in general they are easier and/or less costly for members of one racial group to comply with than for another, for example, a norm that regards cornrows or dreadlocks as messy, which may require many black or mixed race men and women to use harmful chemicals or purchase expensive straight hair extensions in order to comply with it. When everyday lookism involves discrimination that is influenced by these norms, then it constitutes indirect rather than direct discrimination on the basis of race in virtue of the worse effect it has on members of these racial groups, provided that those who engage in it do not do so because of their own racial biases.¹¹

Appearance norms may also sometimes be biased against those with certain disabilities, for example, norms that value symmetrical bodies or faces, or against some

religious minorities, for example, dress codes that require women to wear skirts, or against people who are economically deprived, for example, norms with which it is expensive financially to comply. But I shall begin by focusing on gender-biased and racially-biased appearance norms because they are a good starting point for reflection. When everyday lookism is informed by gender-biased or racially-biased appearance norms, and makes it costly not to comply with these norms, why are the acts of discrimination that it involves wrongful? When it is costly not to comply with them, gender-biased or racially-biased appearance norms might be regarded as unfair, and acts of discrimination shaped by them as non-contingently wrong, simply because they place unequal burdens on one gender compared to the other, or black people compared to white people. But why, exactly, is this unfair or wrongful? One possible response is that it is unfair or wrongful because some are being made worse off than others through no fault of their own. This seems to invoke a luck egalitarian principle of justice. But note that a luck egalitarian approach of this kind cannot justify the claim that these norms, and the acts of discrimination they shape, are unfair or wrongful *simply* in virtue of placing greater burdens on one gender or on a particular racial group. Luck egalitarians must allow that when racially-biased and gender-biased appearance norms form the basis of discrimination, even if they make some worse off through no fault of their own *in one respect*, they do not necessarily make them worse off *all things considered*. As a result, from a luck egalitarian perspective appearance norms that place unequal burdens on different groups are fair provided that any involuntary disadvantage these norms create receives compensation, and therefore the acts of discrimination shaped by these norms are contingently rather than non-contingently wrong.

This does not seem to me to count against a luck egalitarian approach, however. It is not implausible to suppose that the problem with biased appearance norms lies in their overall consequences rather than in the mere fact that they make greater demands on one group compared to another and it is costly not to comply with them. I do not have the space to argue for a particular theory of distributive justice, and I shall not presuppose one in what follows. But it is clear that from the perspective of a variety of different theories, gender-biased and racially-biased appearance norms, and acts of discrimination rooted in them, are potentially a matter of concern from the point of view of distributive justice in virtue of *contributing to the creation* of inequalities that have a morally problematic size, character or effect. Indeed, one way in which they may do is by adversely affecting those who have suffered wrongful discrimination in other contexts. When everyday lookism is fuelled by gender-biased or racially-biased appearance norms, it is likely to make the overall distribution of benefits and burdens more unjust, though that will depend to some degree on what redistributive policies are in place in a society and the particular theory of justice that is invoked. To the extent that women and minority racial groups are unfairly disadvantaged in other contexts, everyday lookism animated by gender-biased or racially-biased appearance norms is likely to be morally objectionable, at least in part, because it makes members of these groups even worse off. In other words, it is likely to be contingently wrong in virtue of its unjust consequences.

As already noted, appearance norms may be biased in other ways. Those that are biased against people with particular disabilities, or against a religious minority, or against the economically deprived, may also contribute to creating or worsening unjust

inequalities. Many appearance norms are what might be termed ‘naturally-biased’ because, independently of whether they are biased in other respects, they place greater demands on those whose appearance is, as a result of their physical nature, further away from the ideal that the norm specifies, that is, whose genes or biological makeup mean that it is harder and/or more costly for them to comply with the norm. Some are born with the potential to acquire the looks that these norms prize without needing to make much effort or incur many costs, for example, some boys are born with the potential to become tall, and thus in later life (assuming adequate nutrition and nothing untoward happens to them) they will fare better when judged against a norm that regards tall men as better-looking. When everyday lookism is informed by naturally-biased appearance norms does it contribute to creating or worsening an unjust distribution of benefits and burdens?

Luck egalitarians should have moral qualms about everyday lookism when it is fuelled by naturally-biased appearance norms on the grounds that the acts of discrimination it involves make some worse off than others through no fault of their own, at least in so far as those made worse off do not receive compensation for the disadvantages they suffer. There may also be reason for adherents to other theories of distributive justice to think that everyday lookism fuelled by naturally-biased appearance norms has unjust consequences. There is empirical evidence that significant economic benefits flow to people who are regarded as more attractive. There are sex differences here, but men and women regarded as attractive earn considerably more over their lifetimes than those whose looks are rated as average, and men and women regarded as unattractive earn considerably less over their lifetimes than those whose looks are rated as average.¹² This evidence does not control for the effects of grooming or other measures that people take to conform to naturally-biased appearance norms, and it does not distinguish between the effects of morally wrongful and morally permissible appearance discrimination in the context of employment decisions. But it provides grounds for thinking that those who are naturally better-looking when judged against these norms are systematically being rewarded with economic benefits even if they are not the beneficiaries of wrongful discrimination, and the sizeable inequalities thereby created ought to be of concern from the point of view of theories of distributive justice that are committed to egalitarian principles or place demanding limits on what inequalities are just. In so far as everyday lookism rooted in naturally-biased appearance norms worsens the position of people who are wrongly disadvantaged on the basis of their appearance in the context of employment decisions, it contributes to creating or exacerbating an unjust distribution of benefits and burdens.

The oppressiveness of everyday lookism

Everyday lookism might be thought to be wrongful on the grounds that it is oppressive (Chambers, 2008: 88). But could everyday lookism be oppressive without being demeaning and without being fuelled by biased appearance norms, or does the charge that it is oppressive reduce to claims about the demeaning character of the acts of discrimination it involves, or to the way in which acts of discrimination rooted in biased appearance norms may contribute to the creation of an unjust distribution? If everyday lookism was fuelled by appearance norms that applied uniformly to everyone, did not adversely affect

disadvantaged groups in an unequal way, and did not treat anyone as morally inferior, could it nevertheless be oppressive?

There are different theories of what it is for someone, or (more usually) some group, to be oppressed. But to say that a practice, such as everyday lookism, is oppressive is not the same as saying that those who are the victims of it are oppressed or members of an oppressed group. For example, it might coherently be claimed that everyday lookism rooted in appearance norms that require professional men to conform to rigid stands of dress and adornment that give little scope for creativity or self-expression is oppressive to them without supposing that they are an oppressed group. To avoid becoming mired in a debate about what is the best way of interpreting the claim that a practice is oppressive, I shall simply stipulate that a practice is oppressive if and only if it impairs the capacity of those who are the victims of it to be the authors of their own lives, that is, a practice is oppressive if and only if it *impairs the autonomy* of its victims. And I shall also stipulate that a practice impairs a person's autonomy if and only if it adversely affects his or her autonomy in such a way that it gives us at least *a* reason for regarding it as wrongful. A practice could in principle be oppressive in this sense even if it involved no race or gender bias, and even if it did not treat anyone as inferior in terms of their status.¹³

I propose to explore the issue of how practices in general may impair autonomy to cast light on how everyday lookism in particular may do so.¹⁴ In order to illustrate the potential oppressiveness of practices, consider a society that has a strong work ethic. It operates with a norm compliance with which requires its members to work no less than 12 hours a day, take no more than a day off a week, and no more than a week's holiday a year. As a result, its members work long hours and have little leisure time, even though they would not be dismissed if they worked 7 hour days, took 2 days off a week, and had a month's holiday a year. Compliance with the norm is burdensome not only in terms of the effort of will required to comply with it, but also in terms of the opportunities for leisure, self-development outside of the work environment, and participation in family life, that are foregone as a result. But *non*-compliance with the norm is burdensome too. Other members of society act disapprovingly towards those who take more time off than the norm permits, sometimes shunning them completely, openly criticising their behaviour, and more generally regarding them as failing in their obligation to make an adequate contribution to society.

Members of this society internalise the norm through a process of socialisation and habituation. As children, they are encouraged to devote most of the hours they are awake to schoolwork as a preparation for their working lives. When they become young adults, they are praised when they comply with the norm and criticised when they fail to do so. As a result of internalising the norm, they gain pleasure from complying with it and feel guilty if they take more time off than it permits.¹⁵ For some, the norm even becomes part of their identity, and their capacity to reflect upon its role in their lives and in their society may be limited. Many of those who internalise the norm endorse it. They may think that it is good that society is governed by it. They may think that they have a moral duty to others to comply with it, perhaps even an unconditional obligation to do so, that is, a duty to comply with it regardless of how others behave. They may think that a life of hard work is the only way of achieving personal fulfilment. They may experience feelings of pleasure when they comply with it, and suffer feelings of guilt when they

fail to comply with it, as a result in part of endorsing the norm. Others who internalise the norm may nevertheless reject it because they regard it as bad for their society or for them, but they may still gain pleasure from complying with it, and feel guilty when they take time off, as a residual effect of the process of socialisation and habituation that they have undergone.

The practice in which this norm is embedded seems oppressive, at least if we assume it is not a justifiable moral norm even though many in the society I have described may treat it as if it were.¹⁶ (If it were a justifiable moral norm, then the practice would not impair personal autonomy even when the costs of complying with the norm, and the costs of not complying with it, were high, because it would not adversely affect autonomy in a way that gives us a reason to regard it as wrongful. Compliance with the norm might be morally required in circumstances where, for example, the worst off were below the level at which they could lead decent lives and adherence to it was necessary in order to bring them up to that level. But I shall assume that these are not the circumstances that obtain in the case I have described.) The practice seems to be oppressive, even though the norm is not enforced by employers, and even though those who are subject to it are not physically prevented from taking more time off, and indeed would not be sacked from their jobs if they did so. Furthermore, the practice seems to be potentially oppressive even for people who endorse the norm and criticise others for failing to live up to it.¹⁷ Let me consider why this practice threatens autonomy in such a way that there is a moral reason for objecting to it.

The processes of socialisation and habituation through which a norm is internalised may undermine (or contribute to undermining) an agent's capacity adequately to reflect upon that norm and decide whether she should seek to comply with it, for example, these processes may result in her being unable to stand back from the norm and question it, or they may involve shielding her from relevant information concerning the risks involved in complying with it. But even when they do not undermine (or contribute to undermining) her capacity to stand back from a norm and subject it adequately to critical scrutiny, the practice in which it is embedded may nevertheless adversely impact upon her autonomy in other ways. When the costs of complying or not complying with a norm are high, the practice may negatively affect her exercise or development of autonomy in one or more respects.

First, if she endorses the norm because she mistakenly regards it as a correct moral norm that spells out what she owes to others, then it may adversely affect her capacity to pursue her own projects effectively, perhaps by reducing the time and energy that she has available to do so after complying with it, or by limiting her opportunities for creativity and self-expression. So even though acting in accordance with the norm may be regarded as an exercise of her autonomy, at the same time her pursuit of her own conception of the good is inhibited in a way that compromises her autonomy.

Second, even if she endorses the norm as part of her own conception of how to live conceived independently of what she owes to others (for instance, she believes that personal fulfilment comes through hard work), the practices in which it is embedded might seriously inhibit her capacity to pursue a revised conception in the future should she change her mind. She may face high costs associated with rejecting the norm, for example, anger from friends or family who might even regard her rejection of it as a

betrayal of them and ostracise her as a result. More generally, the high costs of non-compliance with it may set back her interest in being able to pursue a revised conception of how to live should she decide to do so.

Third, when she does not endorse the norm, it may be very costly for her not to comply with it, and in some cases she may be forced to abide by a conception of how to live that she rejects: the norm may express that conception and the costs of non-compliance with it may be so great that she has no reasonable choice but to comply with it.

Whether the costs of compliance or non-compliance with a norm impair a person's autonomy depends on whether the extent and nature of these costs adversely affect her capacity to pursue her own conception of how to live in such a way that there is a moral reason for objecting to that norm and the practice in which it is embedded. These costs can be divided into those that are in some sense *external* to the subject, for example, the opportunities of which she is deprived, and those that are *internal* to her, that is, burdensome mental states such as painful experiences or feelings of guilt. It would seem that external costs of non-compliance are always relevant for determining whether a social practice involving a norm impairs the autonomy of those subject to it. But what about the internal costs of non-compliance, such as the guilt that would be felt as a result of non-compliance, and indeed the internal costs of compliance, such as the pain experienced as a result of the physical exertion that is needed for compliance? When can internal costs such as these legitimately be taken into account when judging whether a practice is oppressive?

There is a clear case for holding that when a person *rejects* or, at least, does not endorse, a social norm (that is, she regards it either as an objectionable norm or as simply 'one of the rules of the game'), but she nevertheless experiences feelings of shame and guilt when she doesn't comply with it, and she cannot get rid of these feelings or can do so only with great difficulty, then these costs should count in determining whether her autonomy is impaired. When these feelings are the product of the processes of socialisation and habituation that she has experienced, and persist even though she rejects the norm, then they potentially contribute to making the practice in which that norm is embedded oppressive for her.

But what about the internal costs that may result from her *endorsing* the norm, for example, from regarding it as a good or justifiable norm because she thinks it is beneficial in some way or expresses a moral requirement? Suppose for, example, that non-compliance is accompanied by feelings of guilt that arise only because she thinks that she ought to comply with it. It would seem that these costs cannot legitimately be taken into account when making judgements about whether a practice impairs her autonomy, that is, in making judgements about whether her autonomy is adversely affected in a way that gives us a moral reason to object to it, and indeed to take them into account is to fail to give due weight to her status of as an agent with a capacity to make her own judgements about what she should do, including whether she should endorse, and comply with, a social norm that applies to her, and experience the appropriate feelings that would flow from doing so. In effect, we should hold a person responsible for exercising her capacity to reflect upon the norm, and determine whether she should comply with it, by not taking into account the internal costs of failing to comply with it when she endorses it, in

judging whether the practice in which that norm is embedded impairs her autonomy, and therefore in judging whether the practice is oppressive for her.

Partly because the internal costs of non-compliance with a norm count in determining whether a practice in which that norm is embedded is oppressive for a person only if she doesn't endorse that norm, there is in one sense an irreducibly subjective aspect to judgements concerning whether a practice is oppressive: a practice might be oppressive for some of those whose behaviour it governs but not for others. These judgements are also subjective in part because the costs of compliance with a norm, both internal and external, may vary between people since less exertion or fewer resources may be required for some to comply with it than for others. Furthermore, the costs of non-compliance with a norm, both internal and external, may vary from one person to another depending on their psychological dispositions and whether their family, friends, and acquaintances are inclined to criticise them for non-compliance with it.

What implications does my analysis of how norms may be oppressive have for everyday lookism? It creates the basis for a strong case that everyday lookism impairs the autonomy of many people, especially women and especially young adults. In some extreme cases, everyday lookism may contribute to undermining a person's capacity to reflect upon the norms that fuel it. Even when it does not do so, the costs of complying with these norms, and the costs imposed on non-compliers, are often very high. At least, that seems true when we consider the full set of appearance norms that spell out an ideal of what it is to look beautiful, even though it may be less plausible in relation to particular appearance norms. If the acts of discrimination that are constitutive of everyday lookism impair autonomy, or contribute to impairing autonomy, then they are contingently wrong in virtue of doing so, that is, they are wrong because of their causal consequences.¹⁸

Consider the evidence. First, as documented by Widdows and others, some appearance norms are particularly demanding because the external costs of complying with them are very high. As the bar is raised for the 'routine' beauty treatments that are required to meet minimum standards (Widdows, 2018: 107–119), the range of measures that individual women, and sometimes men, need to take in order to comply with appearance norms expands. Some of these treatments, such as extreme dieting or cosmetic surgery, may involve taking significant, even high, risks with respect to one's health and future well-being, whether in the short term or the long term.

Second, there are high costs involved in failing to comply with appearance norms. The costs imposed by everyday lookism, such as the moral shaming that takes place, especially with respect to women but also in relation to men, can be very burdensome. For example, those who are regarded as overweight are accused of lacking self-discipline; women who fail to remove body hair are regarded as disgusting or unhygienic; women who are regarded as making insufficient effort with respect to their appearance are portrayed as letting themselves go, as failing in their duty to themselves, and sometimes as failing in their duty to others to be aesthetically appealing objects; men who paint their nails or wear makeup suffer ridicule and homophobic abuse. As a result, non-compliers may experience debilitating appearance anxiety, low self-esteem and low self-confidence.¹⁹ In some such cases, it might seem that these psychological costs cannot justifiably be regarded as contributing to the impairment of the autonomy of

those adversely affected because they have the capacity to develop thicker skins to avoid being psychologically damaged, and it would be reasonable to expect them to do so. But that response is less plausible in the case of adolescents and young adults. Even when the costs of non-compliance with an appearance norm are not actually very high, they may sometimes reasonably be believed to be high, for example, media images may falsely convey the message to young women that they need to be very thin rather than merely not overweight in order to be regarded as attractive. In these cases, we might regard the perceived costs as contributing to making everyday lookism oppressive.

A failure to comply with an appearance norm may even threaten a person's status within a group or indeed a society. Being badly dressed according to the prevailing norms, for example, wearing worn-out clothes because one cannot afford new ones, may lead to being judged negatively by others in one's society in a way that threatens one's standing (Scanlon, 2018: 30–31). Merely being unfashionably dressed may within some groups lead to loss of status, that is, to being judged as less valuable than other members.

Third, the external costs of compliance and non-compliance sometimes work together to create a double bind, especially for women. People may comply with demanding appearance norms that apply within their group or economic class in order to fit in and avoid being taunted, but face ridicule or shaming from those outside that group or from those who belong to a different economic class. For example, young women who dress in short skirts and apply makeup liberally in order to conform to the appearance norms in their group may be victims of 'slut shaming'; working class women who adopt the dress, makeup and hair styles characteristic of their economic class may be subject to ridicule or be taken less seriously in professional contexts that are governed by different appearance norms.

When everyday lookism is oppressive for a person, it is objectionable, at root, because of the way it impairs her personal autonomy: either because it negatively affects her capacity to reflect upon the appearance norms that inform it and decide whether to comply with them, or because it compromises her ability effectively to pursue her current conception of how to live or to pursue a different one in the future should she revise it, or because it forces her to abide by a conception of how to live that she does not endorse. Compliance with these norms may reduce her appearance-related opportunities for creativity or self-expression or reduce the time and energy that she has to pursue her own conception of how to live, whereas non-compliance with them may negatively affect her confidence in her ability to pursue that conception successfully as a result of feeling unattractive. The costs of non-compliance may also force her to pursue an ideal of beauty that she does not endorse, and indeed from which she may feel alienated.

The harmfulness of everyday lookism

Even if a practice does not impair the autonomy of those affected by it, it may cause, or contribute to causing, physical or psychological harm to them. Consider again the society with the strong work ethic that I described earlier. Members of this society may suffer from illnesses as a result of work-related stress when they strive to comply with the norm. Similarly, the cosmetic procedures that some women undergo in seeking to

make themselves more beautiful when judged against appearance norms may lead to serious health problems in the short or long term, even when there is no negligence on the part of those who perform these procedures.²⁰ Those who don't comply with the work ethic described may experience severe anxiety about their failure to do so, and feelings of guilt that they are not working as hard as others expect and think they should. Similarly, people who do not comply with appearance norms may suffer from severe anxiety about their appearance as a result of everyday lookism, and they may be debilitated by lack of confidence and low self-esteem. But when does the physical or psychological harm that a person suffers as a result of seeking to comply with an appearance norm, or believing that her appearance falls short when judged against that norm, count as a wrong or an injustice that is done to her by everyday lookism and the acts of discrimination it involves?

In addressing this issue, we need to distinguish at least three different types of case. In each, I shall assume that the person concerned possesses an adequate capacity for critical reflection, unless I indicate otherwise. First, cases where the harm suffered by a person is such that she had no control over it: it was not a result of any decisions she made, and she could not have taken any steps to avoid that harm, for example, she could not have cultivated greater resilience in the face of the body shaming she experiences. Second, cases where a person has some control over the harm she suffers, for example, she could have taken steps to become more resilient in response to negative comments about her appearance, or chosen not to respond to the body-image anxiety that she experiences by having risky cosmetic surgery that led to medical complications, but we couldn't reasonably have expected her to do so, perhaps because of the level of that anxiety and its effect on her life, or the effort and willpower that would have been involved in overcoming it, or the maturity that would have been required. Third, cases when a person could have avoided the harm, or taken steps to avoid it, and it would not have been unreasonable to expect her to do so because the costs involved would not have been high.

In practice, cases may be hard to classify. It is clear that children and adolescents who experience fat shaming are generally unable to avoid the anxiety and other adverse psychological effects it creates for them, or if they could do so, it would be unreasonable at their stage of development to expect them to cultivate greater resilience to the taunts they suffer, and they may not yet have developed to any great extent the capacities required to reflect critically on the practice of fat shaming. But what about mature adults? When adults experience a serious loss of self-confidence or suffer severe anxiety as a result of casual comments such as 'you've put on a bit of weight recently' or 'you need to be more careful with what you eat', then even if we are confident that they could have developed a thicker skin, it is often unclear whether it is reasonable to expect them to do so. As a result, it is hard to know whether cases such as these fall into the second category or the third category. Context may make a big difference here: for example, it is reasonable to expect a person to develop a thicker skin when she is floored by a negative remark about her in the context of a supportive friendship, but not necessarily when it is made on social media by a stranger who intends it to have that effect. But we can at least describe clear cases that fall into the third category, even though there may be doubts about how often they occur in reality. For example, when a woman makes a decision to have a buttock enhancement, not because she is anxious about her body, or subject to

taunts, but because one of her ambitions is to make herself more beautiful when judged against appearance norms that she endorses, but she ends up with health problems as a result of the risks she has consciously taken, without any negligence on the part of the surgeons who operated on her.

When cases do fall into the third category, then it would seem that the harm suffered does not constitute an injustice that can be laid at the door of everyday lookism because it was reasonably avoidable. In cases that genuinely fall into this category, those who suffer harm possess an adequate capacity to reflect upon the norm, and either the costs of not acting on it are low, or if they are high, then they are high as a result of internal costs that are due to her endorsement of the norm, rather than, say, the body shaming of others. Just as internal costs that arise from a person's endorsement of a norm do not count in making judgements about whether everyday lookism is oppressive to a person, that is, impairs her autonomy in a way that provides a moral reason to object to that practice, so too these costs do not count in judging whether a harm that a person suffers as a result of everyday lookism could not reasonably have been avoided, and is therefore a wrong that is done to her by it.

Clare Chambers holds the view that if a significant harm is caused by complying with an appearance norm, then that harm is an injustice whenever the only benefits derived from complying with the norm are a consequence of the norm's being endorsed by the agent or by other members of her society (Chambers, 2008: 175–177, 195–197). She builds her case through a discussion of breast implants. She points out that the damage caused to women's health and well-being by this surgery, in both the short and longer term, are potentially high (Chambers, 2008: 187–191), and the benefits of complying with the relevant norms concerning breast size or shape are solely the product of widespread endorsement of these norms. Her account therefore yields the conclusion that the harms some women suffer as a result of breast enhancement surgery are an injustice to them. But Chambers's view seems to have counterintuitive consequences.

Consider a variant of the society with the work ethic, in which the productivity of workers decreases to such an extent that after a certain point there is no benefit in terms of increased productivity for the additional hours worked. Suppose again that in this society there is a high risk to one's health from compliance with the social norm that the ethic involves. Those who comply with the norm by working additional hours receive no extra pay, and indeed the only benefits they obtain from doing so are the result of the norm being endorsed by them and by others, for example, feelings of intense satisfaction at being perceived to have contributed to society by working hard or thinking that they have complied with their moral obligation to do so. Widespread endorsement of the norm is a product of being socialised to accept it and habituated to comply with it from an early age, though members of society also acquire and retain the ability critically to reflect upon the norm and its role in their society. But the costs of non-compliance are very low: although employers and managers may sometimes raise their eyebrows when employees leave early, and make the occasional negative comment to them privately, there is little or no public criticism or shaming of those who fail to comply with the norm, it does not affect their career prospects, and they merely experience mild feelings of anxiety and guilt as a result of their non-compliance. It is not clear that under these

circumstances those who do comply with the norm, and develop stress-related health problems as a result, are the victims of an injustice or wronged in any way.

To say this is not to deny that the society would be better without such a strong work ethic. It is merely to insist that if an agent is harmed by compliance with the norm, or by attempting to comply with it, then that harm wrongs her only if the costs of non-compliance with it are relatively high or she lacks the capacity to reflect adequately on it. If she has the capacity to reflect adequately upon the norm, and the costs of non-compliance with it are low, then the harm she suffers does not wrong her since it was reasonably avoidable by her. Even if in some sense it would have been possible for a society to have adopted a less demanding norm, compliance with which would have been easier for everyone, and those who complied with it or attempted to do so would not suffer any harm as a result, it would not follow that, by adopting the more demanding norm, people who suffer harm as a result of complying with it or seeking to do so have been treated wrongfully. So long as the costs of non-compliance are low, so that the harm is reasonably avoidable by them, they have no reasonable complaint against the harm they suffer.

My approach to assessing the justice or injustice of harms caused by breast implants is correspondingly different from that of Chambers, though how far my conclusions diverge from hers in practice will depend on empirical facts that are not readily accessible. Perhaps for some individual women who seek this surgery, the combined internal and external costs of *not* acting on the relevant norms concerning breast size and shape would be relatively low. According to my view, in these cases, provided the women concerned are aware of the risks and have an adequate capacity to reflect upon the norm, even if they give less weight to these risks than they should, there is no wrong suffered by them if they are harmed as a result of this surgery. But for many women who seek breast enhancement surgery – perhaps the vast majority – the costs of not complying with the relevant norms would be high, for example, some suffer from serious anxiety or a debilitating lack of self-confidence because they believe that their breasts are too small or the wrong shape when judged against that norm. In these cases, there may be good reason to suppose that the victims are wronged by the harms they suffer as a result of opting for surgery because these harms were not reasonably avoidable. According to the view I am defending, however, their anxiety or lack of confidence counts as a relevant cost in determining whether the harms they suffer are reasonably avoidable only if it is not wholly a product of their endorsement of the relevant appearance norm.²¹ Unless their anxiety or lack of self-confidence is caused by factors that are at least partly independent of their endorsement of the norm, for example, body shaming by others, then it should not count in determining whether those harms were reasonably avoidable.

Concluding remarks

I have argued that the acts of discrimination involved in everyday lookism can be non-contingently wrong because they are demeaning. When we take into account the costs of complying and not complying with the norms that fuel the practice, and the processes of socialisation that lead to the norms being internalised, these acts may (in addition or instead) be contingently wrong because they contribute to impairing the autonomy of

those adversely affected. Everyday lookism may also be contingently wrong because of the harm it causes, such as mental health problems that are rooted in body anxiety, or physical harms that result from trying to improve one's appearance, including the side effects of undertaking risky cosmetic procedures. Furthermore, everyday lookism may be contingently wrong because the biased norms that shape it may contribute to the creation of objectionable inequalities.

People may have an aesthetic or other interest in commenting upon the appearance of others, and depending upon the context and the manner in which it is done, there may be nothing morally problematic about it. Even when it is morally objectionable, the outcomes generated by those striving to comply with the norms that are embedded in everyday lookism may not all be bad. Widdows points out that the pleasure that people may gain from their attempts to do so, together with the creativity that may be involved, and the feelings of solidarity they may enjoy from sharing their experiences with others, may be of significant value (Widdows, 2018: 151–156, 185–191). But the good that comes about in this way does not seem to outweigh the wrongfulness that is often involved in the practices these norms govern and through which they are sustained.

Nothing in my argument, however, supports the conclusion that appearance norms and the everyday lookism that they fuel are always morally problematic. The arguments I have developed apply against everyday lookism when it is demeaning, or oppressive, or unjustly harmful, or contributes to creating an unjust distribution of benefits and burdens. It leaves conceptual space for at least two sorts of unobjectionable practices that may involve commenting negatively on the appearance of others but need not be demeaning or oppressive, or have other unjust consequences. Firstly, practices that involve norms that apply within a group that one can choose to join, in which people strive to comply with these norms and judge each other's appearance on the basis of them, but where not joining (and indeed not joining any group of this kind) is costless. In effect these groups would provide an opportunity to be governed by a set of appearance norms as a way of defining or expressing oneself. Think here of the way in which people might choose, in the absence of any peer-group pressure, to lead a goth or punk lifestyle, dressing in a way that expresses that identity. Secondly, practices that involve norms that apply to everyone but which are not demeaning nor oppressive (because the costs of complying with these norms and of not complying with them do not impair anyone's autonomy), and which do not contribute to creating an unjust distribution of benefits and burdens, for example, appearance codes governing the attendance of funerals that specify clothing that is readily available and not costly to acquire. In sum, the legitimate complaints we have against everyday lookism leave space for a society in which there is a diversity of appearance norms, and some choice about which to endorse and through which potentially to express one's identity or exercise one's creative powers – and indeed the choice, to some extent, of simply ignoring these norms altogether.

In my view, this is an appealing vision but it is compatible with a society that places what we might justifiably regard as far too much weight on people's appearance, and in which we think appearance norms are insufficiently inclusive because, for some, it is impossible, or difficult or costly, for them to conform to these norms, even though the norms are not oppressive to them because the costs of non-compliance, and the costs of attempting to comply, are insufficient to lead to an impairment of their autonomy. I agree

that societies are better when they place much less weight on appearance than happens in our own, and when the appearance norms that apply in them are inclusive. Furthermore, it may well be the case that the best way in practice of countering the oppressiveness of everyday lookism in the societies in which we live will include working individually and collectively to make appearance norms more inclusive. But *in principle* a society in which there are non-inclusive appearance norms need not be unjust.

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Notes

1. For the notion of everyday lookism, see <https://www.birmingham.ac.uk/research/public-affairs/policy-briefings/2019/everyday-lookism.aspx>, accessed 27 November 2020. For the idea of lookism more generally, see Minerva (2017) and Liu (2017).
2. See Widdows (2018: 26–35). Widdows claims that this ideal of beauty now has global reach, though she allows that there may be some cultural variations, for example, with respect to how, exactly, the constituents are understood, or with respect to additional ingredients (Widdows, 2018: Ch. 3). Indeed, her claim is consistent with local variations in appearance norms, for example, different groups within a society or indeed a region may adopt different norms concerning how one should dress, or adhere to different norms with respect to tattoos or piercings.
3. According to the intuitive understanding with which I am working, A discriminates against P *directly* if and only if A treats P less favourably than Q because P has some property C that Q lacks, where Q is an actual or possible person, whereas A discriminates against P *indirectly* if and only if P is a member of a socially salient group G and A behaves in a way that

disadvantages members of G compared to members of other socially salient groups, even though A is not biased against members of G. These analyses require refinement but they nevertheless capture our ordinary notions in a rough and ready way. According to them, there is no automatic inference from the fact that an act is discriminatory to the conclusion that it is even *pro tanto* wrong. For a more nuanced analysis of these concepts, see Lippert-Rasmussen (2014: Chs. 1–2).

4. Might it be better to conceive of the acts that constitute everyday lookism as microaggressions, and draw upon an account of what makes microaggression wrong? Many cases of everyday lookism don't seem to count as microaggressions in Emily McTernan's sense (McTernan, 2018: 261–281), for those who make negative remarks about the appearance of others are often aware that they will upset the people at the receiving end. Furthermore, there is at least a *prima facie* case for saying that some of the acts involved are morally objectionable even when the victims of them are not part of a marginalised or disadvantaged group, for example, when a middle-aged heterosexual white man is ridiculed for wearing makeup.
5. In effect I draw upon a pluralist theory of what makes discrimination wrong (when it is wrong) that maintains that there are at least two potential sources of its wrongfulness, namely, the disrespect it may involve and its harmful consequences. In relation to the former, I have been influenced especially by Hellman (2008) and Eidelson (2015); in relation to the latter, I have been influenced especially by Lippert-Rasmussen (2014: Ch. 6). Of these writers only Eidelson is a pluralist, however. For more on the distinction between pluralism and monism in theories of what makes discrimination wrong, see Moreau (2020: Ch. 5).
6. I don't intend this characterisation of an appearance norm to be a contribution to debates concerning the best way of understanding a social norm. It is formulated to leave open the possibility that an appearance norm might be sustained by a sizeable group of people complying with it even though they don't endorse it and indeed think it is bad for the society or group to which they belong, that is, to make space for what Cristina Bicchieri calls 'pluralistic ignorance' (Bicchieri, 2017: 44). For a helpful discussion of the nature of norms to which I am indebted, see Brennan et al. (2013: Part 1).
7. This way of conceiving appearance norms has the plausible implication that the costs of complying and not complying with an appearance norm may change over time but do not affect its identity.
8. In fact, Hellman regards demeaning discrimination as intrinsically wrong, but in my terms, for reasons that will become clear later on, her view is better characterised as the claim that demeaning discrimination is non-contingently wrong.
9. For an analysis of how objectification of this kind amounts to a morally problematic denial of autonomy, see Langton (2009: Ch. 10).
10. Here I mean costs in the broadest sense: not just financial costs, but also, for example, psychological costs and opportunities for self-expression foregone.
11. When those who criticise the appearance of others on the basis of racially-biased norms do so because of their own racial biases, then they are engaged in direct racial discrimination. For a careful analysis of the concept of indirect discrimination and how it differs from direct discrimination, see, Lippert-Rasmussen (2014: Ch. 2).
12. Daniel Hamermesh claims that, in the US, below average-looking women earn 4 per cent less than average-looking women, whereas above-average looking women earn 8 per cent more than those who are average looking. Below-average looking men earn 13 per cent less than average-looking

- men, whereas above average-looking men earn 4 per cent more than average-looking men. In other words, the overall beauty premium for good-looking women is 12 per cent, whereas for men it is 17 per cent (Hamermesh, 2011: 45–46). See also Liu and Sierminska (2014).
13. Even though a practice can be oppressive even if it does not treat anyone as inferior and does not employ biased norms, if it lacks both these features, then it will not be discriminatory.
 14. Both Chambers and Widdows argue that assumptions that are often made about the way in which choosing to participate in a practice renders the burdens involved in doing so just make it hard to see how appearance norms of the kind I have been discussing could wrongfully impair individual autonomy (see Chambers, 2008: Ch. 5; Widdows, 2018: Ch. 9). Like them, I reject the idea that ‘choice’, considered independently of the social context in which it is made, has a morally transformative effect, in the sense that outcomes that would otherwise be regarded as wrongful are automatically rendered just by it. My reflections on norm-governed practices in what follows are intended to explain why this is so.
 15. For his seminal discussion of the way in which power operates through the internalisation of social norms, see Foucault (1991). Foucault’s insights have been developed by a number of feminist writers: see especially Bartky (1997) and Chambers (2008).
 16. I am assuming that the work ethic I have described is comprised of social norms. Brennan et al. propose that social norms are distinguished from moral norms in virtue of the fact that the justification of the former but not the latter makes an essential reference to social practices (Brennan et al., 2013: Ch. 4). Many of those who comply with the work ethic I have described see it as comprised of moral norms, so to treat it as a set of social norms has a debunking aspect. The same is true of appearance norms. As Widdows argues, many of those who comply with appearance norms regard them as moral norms (Widdows, 2018: 26–31), so to treat them as social norms is in effect to deny that they are moral norms. Others may regard appearance norms as aesthetic norms. Depending on how we understand aesthetic norms, it may be that to treat appearance norms as social norms is in effect to deny that they are aesthetic norms.
 17. This raises a question that goes beyond the scope of the article, namely, who can justifiably be held responsible for the oppressiveness of a norm? An adequate answer to this question would need to acknowledge that responsibility is dispersed and may come in degrees. Individuals may incur some responsibility for the oppressiveness of a norm simply by conforming to it, but those who criticise or shame others for not complying with it incur a higher degree of responsibility, as may celebrities, and ‘influencers’ on social media, when they endorse and comply with demanding appearance norms.
 18. We might nevertheless say that the practice of everyday lookism, made up of these acts together with the costs they impose on others, is non-contingently wrong in virtue of the way in which it impairs autonomy.
 19. For relevant evidence and discussion, see Grogan (2016). For evidence of body dissatisfaction and its impact in the UK, see Government Equalities Office (2014). For evidence from the US, see Bucchianeri et al. (2013: 1–7). The Nuffield Council on Bioethics report (2017: 1.6–1.11), provides a good summary of the empirical evidence on appearance dissatisfaction.
 20. So too there may be health risks associated with cosmetics and the use of drugs as aids for dieting. See Rhode (2010: 35–40).
 21. There might nevertheless be good paternalistic and non-paternalistic reasons for regulating, or even prohibiting, breast enhancement surgery, even if it were the case that those harmed by it are not wrongfully harmed.

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