

MIXED BLESSINGS: WOMEN AND BLONDE HAIR

Druann Maria Heckert, Fayetteville State University

ABSTRACT

Blonde women constitute a curious and interesting case—in the context of deviance—in that they are to some extent positive deviants, due to the fact that they have been considered as surpassing normative expectations of appearance and have received some positive evaluation and treatment. Yet, they have also been subject to stigmatization, or negative evaluation and treatment. Thus, the reaction has not been consistent. Qualitative research served as the basis for this study; twenty blonde women were interviewed. Firstly, in some respects, blonde women are positive deviants; they have been idealized in Western traditions and thus encounter positive evaluations. The blonde women interviewed for this study were cognizant of this fact and reported that positive attention and positive treatment were common experiences. Nevertheless, blonde women are also recipients of negative evaluations. The blonde women in this sample analyzed the culturally constructed stereotypes that have been applied to them, as follows: innocence, sexy/fun, easy and dumbness/stupidity. They also presented strategies that they had to develop to deal with the last stereotype, which included the following: ignoring the stereotype or joking about it, self-fulfilling the prophecy, overcompensating (including taking on the ice princess role), fighting back, and passing. Also, blonde women felt that their relationships with other women were negatively impacted by their hair color. In essence, blonde women experience mixed evaluations.

Deviance is complex as are reactions to deviance. For example, a new typology of deviance has been developed to integrate and take into account normative and reactivist paradigmatic definitions of deviance (Heckert & Heckert 2002). Negative deviance refers to behaviors or conditions that under conform, or fail to conform, to normative expectations and subsequently receive negative evaluations. Rate-busting indicates behaviors or conditions that over conform to the norms yet produce negative evaluations. Deviance admiration points to behaviors or conditions that do not conform to the norms but elicit positive reactions. Finally, positive deviance denotes behaviors or conditions that both over conform to the norms and are positively appraised. This typology serves to illuminate the complexity, and at times, inconsistent nature of evaluations. Furthermore, due to the contextual nature of deviance, the same behavior (or condition) can produce both positive and negative evaluations. Those contradictory evaluations can occur across time or across cultural or subcultural traditions. Mixed evaluations can also occur contemporaneously regarding the same behavior or condition; thus, that same behavior or condition can simultaneously be placed in more than one category in the aforementioned typology. For example, gifted children are rate-busters to their peers, yet positive deviants to their teachers and parents (Heckert & Heckert 2002). Irwin (2003) has noted that elite tattoo collectors are simultaneously defined as both positive and negative devi-

ants, depending on the audience. I attempt to expand on this point of the complexity of evaluations by analyzing a group that is simultaneously treated as a case of positive deviance, yet still subjected to stigmatization. I conducted a qualitative study in which 20 blonde women were interviewed. The subjective experience of blonde women is portrayed. Blonde women are positive deviants, in that they are positively evaluated for exceeding normative appearance expectations; nevertheless, they are also negatively evaluated and treated as well.

Seemingly an inconsequential variable, hair is part of the connection between appearance and self (Stone 1962). According to Synott (1987:404), "Hair is hair is hair? Not exactly. It is also a powerful symbol of the self." So powerful is that symbol that hair can have political, cultural, and religious connotations (Synott 1987; Banks 2000). Blondes have often been considered the dominant image of idealized beauty in European traditions; nevertheless, natural brunettes constitute the vast numerical majority of Americans. Consequently, fewer socially constructed stereotypes exist about brunettes (Cooper 1971). Natural blondes and natural redheads, on the other hand, compose a small percentage of all Americans. Sixteen percent of American females are born naturally blonde (Loftus 2000) with only five percent remaining naturally blonde as adults (Synott 1987). Another two to three percent of the population is born redheaded (Meyerowitz 1991). For blondes and redheads, stereo-

types abound and differential treatment ensues (Heckert & Best 1997). In a sense, the transparency phenomenon—which suggests that whites are advantaged and privileged in the structural/cultural context of this society and do not have to even consider themselves in terms of race or think about the consequences of race or construct a racial identity—is, perhaps, applicable (Griscom 1992; Flagg 1993; McIntyre 1997). Hair is obviously and emphatically extraordinarily less consequential than race. The analogy is that brunettes are not as likely to have to experience stereotypes about hair color—as opposed to other aspects of hair—and thus are perhaps less cognizant about how it shapes their treatment and sense of self as culture has not created a complex stereotypical construction about their hair color. Blondes and redheads, on the other hand, do have to consider hair color as a variable that significantly impacts their lived reality and consequently becomes a vital part of self-identity. In essence, hair is more complex than could be presumed from a cursory glance. Blonde hair—especially on women—presents a curious case. Blonde women have been simultaneously adulated and marginalized in Western traditions. As such, the case of blonde women highlights the aforementioned contention.

METHODOLOGY

Qualitative methodology served as the basis for this study. Twenty blonde women were interviewed. Nonprobability sampling was utilized—both convenience sampling (Nachmias & Nachmias 1996) and snowball sampling (Babbie 1995). A major limitation of nonprobability sampling is that generalizations cannot be made about the population under examination (Babbie 1995). Nevertheless, nonprobability sampling is often used when populations cannot be delineated (Miller 1986; Schneider & Conrad 1993; Weitz 1993). The author conducted the face-to-face interviews, which were structured; open-ended questions served as the basis for the interview schedule (Nachmias & Nachmias 1996). The same questions were asked to redheads, blondes, and brunettes as part of a larger study and involved the following areas: experience of the hair as a child, adolescent and adult; perceived stereotypes of society; positive aspects of the hair color; negative aspects of the hair

color; perceived understandings of the cultural definition of the attractiveness of the hair; perceived reactions of men to the hair; perceived reactions of women to the hair; perceived positive and negative consequences of the hair; perceived commonality with other women with the hair color; and overall reaction to the hair. All in all, the questions were developed to focus on the subjective understanding of hair color and how it impacts life experiences. While further quantitative research on this topic would be important in providing empirical refutation or support of this research, qualitative research of this type is quite common—for creating the sociological patterns or categories—within the substantive area of deviance (Nack 2003; Miller 2003; Degher & Hughes 2003; Sandstrom 2003). A descriptive and exploratory explanation of the experience of blonde women is the intent of this study.

The sample was limited to blonde women. In the case of blondes, societal/cultural stereotypes seem to proliferate about blonde women to a far greater extent than about blonde men. This situation is different from the case of redheads, where stereotypes proliferate fairly equally among men (wimps, hotheads, clowns) and women (seductresses, hotheads, clowns) (Heckert & Best 1997). As such, the focus of this study is on women and their experience of being blondes; nevertheless, a study of blonde men would further refine the understanding of hair color. The other major restriction in this study was that the respondents had to be natural blondes in order to provide a basis for examining the entire life experience—including the pivotal youthful socialization experience—of blondes. Clearly, a study of women who have dyed their hair would create another interesting study. While utilizing cues such as eyebrow color and roots, I did find myself in the awkward situation of asking a natural brunette—with an excellent hairdresser—if she were a natural blonde. Nevertheless, all the blondes interviewed in this study were natural blondes through adulthood (although some had dyed their hair even lighter shades of blonde or other colors at various points in their life). While perhaps it would have been useful in further delineating the experiences of blonde women and whether or not light blondes have different experiences than dark blondes, the shade of blonde was not noted at the time of the collection of the data. The

researcher purposefully chose to include women from various age groups to ascertain if blondeness was differentially experienced across the life course. The age range of this study was from 12 to 66; the only way that age appeared to impact the experiences of the sample was that blonde youth were more likely to emphasize the social advantages; blonde adults were especially prone to analyze the drawbacks of being accepted as competent and professional women. Eight of the respondents lived in the South; twelve resided in the Northeast. The women were either in professional or white-collar positions (if adults), in college, or in junior high or high school (with the intention of attending college). Consequently, they may have emphasized the drawbacks of the negative aspersions regarding intelligence. A sample of women in occupations where appearance is more emphasized would further enhance the understanding of blonde women. All in all, the sample was limited on several criteria but varied on others.

BLONDE WOMEN AS POSITIVE DEVIANTS **Positive Deviance**

Previously, positive deviance has been defined from various points of view. For example, several theorists—even if not employing the term—have suggested that positive deviance occurs when norms are exceeded (Sorokin 1950; Wilkins 1965; Winslow 1970) and thus posit a norm-violation definition of positive deviance. Other theorists have also proffered a definition of positive deviance from a labeling perspective (Freedman & Doob 1968; Hawkins & Tiedeman 1975; Scarpitti & McFarlane 1975; Steffensmeier & Terry 1975; Norland, Hepburn & Monette 1976). From this point of view, positive deviance suggests those behaviors that are positively labeled. According to Norland et al.,

We prefer to theoretically conceptualize the moral dimensions of human behavior as a continuum including both negatively evaluated behaviors and attributes as well as positively evaluated behaviors or attributes. (1976:84)

Further, various theorists have advanced other, more specific, definitions of positive deviance that adhere to neither the normative nor reactivist perspective (Buffalo & Rodgers 1971; Palmer & Humphrey 1990;

Ewald & Jiobu 1985). Heckert and Heckert (2002) subsumed normative and reactivist theoretical perspectives and defined positive deviance as those behaviors and conditions that over conform to the norms and also receive positive evaluations. Blondes are positive deviants in that they surpass cultural norms of attractiveness and are treated positively; nevertheless, they are also negatively evaluated.

Appearance and Positive Deviance

Based on examples, cited within the existing literature on positive deviance, Heckert (1998) created the following typology of positive deviance: altruism, charisma, innovation, supra-conformity, innate characteristics, and ex-deviants. Innate characteristics are a type of positive deviance and according to Heckert,

The use of the terminology, innate characteristics, is actually not the best choice to describe this type of positive deviance. These traits (e.g., beauty, intelligence, talent), are innate to a certain, as to yet, unspecified extent, and to a certain, as to yet, unspecified extent, are modified by environmental conditions. (1998:27)

The physically attractive are treated as positive deviants in that physical appearance is an innate characteristic that is differentially treated and acted upon. Byrne argued:

It would seem safe to propose that in our society, physical attractiveness is a positively valued attribute. That is, both males and females would prefer to be attractive rather than unattractive, to have attractive friends, to marry an attractive spouse, and to produce attractive offspring. Such concerns seem both arbitrary and petty in the abstract...Clearly the proposition that members of our culture attach meaning to physical attractiveness is supported. (1971:127, 131)

The appreciation of appearance obviously can be quite idiosyncratic; nevertheless, cultures create idealized versions and features that lead to the attribution (at a societal and interpersonal level) of attractiveness. While these icons vary through time and are differentially perceived in various cultures and subcultures, Berscheid and Walster maintained,

It appears, however, that culture transmits effectively, and fairly uniformly, criteria for labeling others as physically 'attractive' and 'unattractive.' (1964:181)

Appearance is a powerful variable in that those culturally construed as attractive by dominant constructs are provided opportunities and advantages across the spectrum of life experiences (Byrne 1971; Dion 1972; Landy & Sigall 1974; Krebs & Adinolfi 1975; Reis, Wheeler & Nezluk 1980; Reis, Wheeler, Spiegel, Kerns, Nezluk & Perry 1982; Zebrowitz, Collins & Dutta 1998; Bull & Rumsey 1988). Empirical evidence suggests that the attractive are positively labeled and evaluated.

Attractive women have been variously advanced as a form of positive deviance (Lemert 1951; Hawkins & Tiedeman 1975) as have been beauty pageant winners (Scarpitti & McFarlane 1975). Additionally, King and Clayson (1988) refer to the attractive as "non-traditional deviants." While they do include attractive males, perhaps reflecting shifting gender roles, the other examples were only of attractive females. Women have been more likely to be evaluated on their appearance than men (Schur 1983; Mazur 1986).

Blonde Women as Positive Deviants

Blonde women are positive deviants in that they over conform to appearance norms of European traditions and have been positively evaluated. Beginning with an assumption of relativity, Western societies and Western cultures have viewed blondes as over conforming to appearance norms and positively evaluated them. This elevation of blondes has persisted across time, through various centuries. The reason that blond hair is defined as attractive in Western cultures is not clear and some of the blonde women interviewed did not view it as necessarily good. One respondent commented

...I'm Jewish...When I see blonde guys, I get a Nazi image, a shaven head, Aryan Nazi image, so get hair.

Furthermore, one respondent noted the discriminatory nature of this image when she plainly stated,

It's Eurocentric or Anglocentric. Blonde hair means you're more likely to be European or

WASP, just racism.

Still, this paradigm has lasted over time within Western traditions.

In fact, substantial evidence does suggest that all things being equal, blondes have traditionally been granted a cultural advantage in relation to definitions of appearance. While various criteria are utilized to culturally establish notions of attractiveness, hair has been an important component of the conception of attractiveness (Cooper 1971; Synnott 1987; Alexander & Schouten 1989; Cahill 1989). Additionally, while hair can be assessed on various factors (e.g., texture, length, style and sheen), hair color has been one of the primary features on which hair has been judged. In reference to hair color, blonde hair has been a standard of beauty in Western culture. According to Rich and Cash,

In Western, Caucasian society, there seems to be a popular image of beautiful women as having a fair complexion, light eye color, and light hair color in contrast to an ideal image of men as having darker features. (1993:115)

Further Lawson (1971:312) noted, "Some have the blonde (female) as the cultural ideal of the beautiful, pure woman." According to Cooper,

Fair hair has constantly held its place in the European ideal of feminine beauty. For long periods, the woman with blonde hair has been the object of European male's desire. (1971:75)

In Western literary tradition, Goethe mythologized the powers of blonde hair as follows,

Beware of her fair hair for she excels
All the women in the magic of her locks;
And when she winds them round a young
man's neck
She will not ever let them free again.
(as quoted in Cooper 1971:76)

While some evidence suggests that, in a more contemporary sense, gentlemen (i.e., New York college students) prefer brunettes (Lawson 1971) and other evidence suggests that blonde hair (in the form of a wig) does not create a situation of eliciting more help from a stranger (Juni & Roth 1985), most

evidence maintains that blondes have been the recipients of a culturally constructed notion of beauty. Synott (1987) observed that empirical evidence substantiates a continued pattern in this direction in that men are two to three times more likely to admire blonde hair than any other hair color and furthermore, when asked to describe blonde women refer to them as "beautiful, rich, and extremely feminine." Ironically, blonde hair does not benefit males, as women are two times more likely to prefer dark hair on men. Feinman and Gill (1978) concluded that generally, culture still shapes a male preference for fair females and a female preference for dark males. In conjunction with this cultural preference for blondes, blonde women disproportionately dominate in the various entertainment industries, serving as symbolic representations of beauty. Consequently, when women color their hair, blonde is the color most often chosen. In a nutshell, as Synott (1987:388) posited, "Blonde perhaps is seen as an essentially female colour, like pink; with dark hair as primarily a male colour." According to Clayson and Maughan (1986:815), blonde women are viewed as "beautiful, pleasant, pleasing, and extremely feminine" and Clayson and Klassen (1989: 199) contended, "blondes are generally perceived as more attractive." Rich and Cash (1993) reviewed the hair color of cover models—in two magazines targeted to women (*Ladies Home Journal* and *Vogue*) and one magazine targeted to men (*Playboy*)—from the 1950's through the 1990's. They concluded that blondes are significantly over represented in all three magazines, but most over represented in the magazine designed to appeal to men. In a survey of college students, Jacobi and Cash (1992) found that 22 percent of their particular sample were naturally blonde, 39 percent wished that they were blonde and 84 percent felt that men preferred blondes (actually more males reported a preference for the more numerically common brunettes); in many respects, blonde becomes an iconic or idealized image in society and it is held up as a standard of beauty. Impressionistically, it would appear that culture has become more inclusive and less hegemonic in creating imagery of female beauty—at least as represented by the iconic image of the model—in terms of certain criteria, such as ethnicity, than on others, such as body type or facial disfigurement. Never-

theless, some evidence still suggests a cultural image that favors blondes. An analysis of 907 full page advertisements featuring a single woman—of four issues (March, June, September and December) in 2002 of the top ten leading women's magazines—still continued to show that blonde women were over represented in terms of their percentage of the population. Of those ads, 33.1 percent featured a blonde woman (as opposed to 5 percent of the U.S. adult population); furthermore, blondes were the most likely to be portrayed as glamorous (i.e., the ad featured some aspect of the woman's appearance as critical in selling the product). In these ads, women were portrayed as glamorous in the following descending order: blonde (86.3%), brunette (77.4%), redhead (69.7%) and gray (33.3%) (Heckert, Heckert & Heckert 2003). Old adage suggests that the more things change, the more they stay the same. For example, Armentor (2003) notes that in the context of virtual romance, appearance remains a critical variable. The medium has changed but cultural emphasis on appearance has not. The same would seemingly be true about blondes. Clearly, the media and society have moved toward fairer and greater inclusiveness of various looks; yet, current evidence would tend to suggest that while it can vary by decade (Rich & Cash 1993), blondes still have not fallen into disfavor as an image. As Rich and Cash note,

This image delivers a message to society that blonde is a prominent ideal of feminine beauty. This message may have contributed to our cultural preoccupation with bloneness. (1993:120)

All in all, cultures create images of beauty. As with other unfairly constructed norms of attractiveness, such as a preference for a thin body type over an obese body type (Cahnman 1968; DeJong 1980; Crandall & Biernat 1990), blonde hair has been viewed as over conforming to appearance norms. In certain ways, blondes have also been positively evaluated.

The women interviewed were quite cognizant and acutely aware—even if their responses might sound self-serving—that blondes are the recipients of a cultural advantage in relationship to their hair color. They virtually all mentioned that a cultural image associated with bloneness is that blondes

are attractive or sexy. Overwhelmingly, the respondents expressed their belief that being a blonde was more advantageous than being a brunette or a redhead. Some women stated this opinion overtly; other women expressed it in a subtler manner. A 20-year-old female simply stated,

The blonde is the ideal woman in our society.

As a 12-year-old noted, the portrayal of blondes in the media is

...sort of like, more like, sexy, because they are pretty.

Another young woman noted,

Just generally, blondes are defined as more attractive.

Another respondent hypothesized,

People always think of blondes as more beautiful, more sexy, Barbie doll look. Big breasts, blonde hair, thin, dominate our society.

One woman explained the phenomenon, accounting for individual differences in attractiveness, as follows,

If you had three women all with the same facial features, just change the hair color, and ask people which is most attractive; people would be drawn to the blonde. If you notice, watching Miss America, even my nephew at age ten picks the winner, always the blonde. At a very young age, kids are taught that blondes are preferable.

Another typical response was that of a woman who stated,

Oh, the first instinct is a blonde is defined as more attractive.

Another commented,

They're more attractive; the blonde bombshell.

Another stated,

Just generally, blondes are defined as more

attractive.

A few did preface their comments by suggesting that the imagery of blondes was a cultural construction that included other features in its idealized version; thus, some respondents felt that this ideal image excluded them and made it difficult for them as they were blonde but not quite the whole culturally created package of a blonde. Other attributes variously mentioned in this hypothesized ideal image were figure, hair length, and eye color. As a 20-year-old related,

I've always had short hair. I never thought of myself as one of those beautiful women; even though recognizing blonde is the look.

Another respondent said the ideal image is a tall, blue-eyed blonde and regarding blonde women,

I would say it's only sexy if the woman who has it fits the stereotype, five-feet, seven-inches, thin, not just any woman.

She noted, however, that all other attributes being equal, blonde was still more sexy than any other hair color and in her opinion, blondes were vastly over represented in appearance-based occupations, such as modeling. Another respondent suggested,

It's the physical characteristics, big bust, small waist. I think it has to do with body shape, but blonde adds to it.

Another woman stated,

I had an image to live up to [as a blonde], I wanted to be there, but was not.

Another stated that compared to the blonde standard, she defined herself as "athletic, stumpy" and never felt completely like a blonde.

POSITIVE EVALUATIONS OF BLONDE WOMEN

As positive deviants, positive consequences emerge for blonde women. Labeling theory provides a lens from which to observe those consequences. A significant element of labeling theory is the contention that the labeling of individuals critically impacts the lives of those labeled. In the case

of deviants, the direction of this impact has usually been described as negative; Tannenbaum (1980) analyzed the dramatization of evil, Schur (1971) suggested role engulfment, Lemert (1972) observed the transformation from primary to secondary deviance, and Erikson (1964) proposed that the labeling can produce a self-fulfilling prophecy. In the case of positive deviants, the labeling will be positive and it can be assumed then that the role engulfment will be in a positive direction. While it might seem self-centered, the blonde women interviewed seemed cognizant of the positive spin placed on their hair.

Positive Attention

Overwhelmingly, as previously mentioned, the respondents felt that being a blonde provided them with privilege. Various women also related that on a more personal level they had experienced the advantage that accompanies that status. As one blonde noted regarding the benefits of blonde hair,

The advantage is attractiveness and what advantages attractiveness leads to.

As one woman explained,

I can't remember not knowing I would be considered more attractive because of blonde hair.

As another related,

If a brunette is standing next to me, I would get more attention.

One woman described her understanding of blonde hair as follows:

I like it. Maybe just because I was born with it...It's kind of light. It's the color of gold—a commodity that people value. In terms of your complexion, it brightens it up. I once read a magazine article; there are certain features in any culture that are valued in a woman, like big eyes. It tends to be those physical features associated with children like wide eyes...True blondes are children. You can preserve the quality of the innocence of youth.

A 21-year-old respondent noted,

It stands out; catches men's eyes. I think

blondes and redheads might be assumed to be more sexy. It's the first thing somebody will notice.

Clearly, from the viewpoint of women in this sample, blonde hair is an advantage in relation to cultural notions of attractiveness and interpersonal experiences of attractiveness.

The women interviewed also hypothesized that positive attention was a constant throughout the life course. For most, the attention was bestowed upon them from an early point in their lives and was consistently positive. The interviewed women noted that while other children did not make comments—either positive or negative—about their hair, adults lavished them with praise. As one young woman explained about her childhood,

They usually react to your hair, you're so beautiful, so cute, little princess. You get told, 'You're very pretty.'

Another commented,

I had almost white hair, very unusual. Everybody thought it was beautiful. A lot of comments; just how cute you were and how pretty your hair was.

A 62-year-old woman revealed that adults would react positively,

They'd say, 'You're beautiful.' I had long blonde ringlets. I looked like Shirley Temple with blonde hair. Adults always commented; all positive.

Another woman related an instance of what she felt was a consistent pattern of positive reinforcement,

They [adults] liked it. I remember one time I was on the bus with my mother...I can remember the people in the back pointing and saying wasn't her hair pretty. I never saw hair that color. It's beautiful. It probably spoiled me. I got a lot of attention...When I was growing up, it was the color; nobody ever said anything negative, it was always positive attention. People talk to little kids more because they're blonde; I don't know, is that possible?"

One young woman noted about adult reaction,

They definitely liked it or were attracted to it, because it was so light it catches your eye.

Another respondent noted, that as a child, friends, parents, and teachers, would say,

You're beautiful—blonde hair; it still happens.

A 24-year-old commented,

Mom said when I was little everyone loved it, wanted to touch it, platinum blonde hair. She wanted to put me in a hair show; she was so scared somebody would want to take me.

An adolescent respondent described the attention,

It makes you feel special that they recognize you. When I was younger, it caused a positive self-esteem.

An adolescent blonde remembered a story from her childhood featuring a brunette, *Sarah, Plain and Tall* (Maclachlan 1985) and commented,

They [brunettes] don't stand out as much as little blondes and red-haired kids. They [blondes and redheads] get more comments. It's a different color, not brunette.

She often received compliments referring to her pretty hair. Another stated,

Culturally, it is considered positive. I received constant positive comments—what beautiful hair, the color of wheat, the color of sun shining in something, spun gold.

All in all, blondes felt that their blonderness elicited much positive attention as children.

The attention, which started in childhood, continued through the life course, even if it was not always desired. As an example, one woman, who described herself as shy, related an adolescent desire to darken her hair as a way to lessen some of the attention directed at her,

When I was a teenager, I wanted dark highlights; I still wanted it blonde. I felt that it was so light, so blonde, it stood out. If I

died it, it wouldn't have caught people's eyes. People wouldn't be attracted as quick. People wouldn't have treated me differently. I was a very shy person; the fact that people were caught by it, I didn't like it. No, I didn't.

Additionally, another woman stated,

I think maybe I get more attention. If a brunette is standing next to me, I would get more attention and it's more noticeable—not a lot of blondes. I get more attention because of my blonde hair than a brunette.

One woman noted that she received more compliments on hair than anything else. She also noticed then when she is out with a group of friends, she is always the first one noticed in the group. An adolescent respondent suggested,

Blondes naturally get more attention (good or bad); it's different. People say look at the blonde; no one says look at the brunette.

Another respondent commented,

It boosted my self-confidence, it's the sense of a self-fulfilling prophecy—you think how others perceive you is how you are—exterior things. On the interior I wanted to work on [myself]. I have changed over the years. It made me scared of getting older, losing my hair color, my complexion, looking like everyone else or no one special.

Blonde women, numerically less common in society than brunettes, noted a sustained pattern of attention.

Positive Treatment

Most of the women felt that considerable opportunities materialized in their lives due to hair color. Many felt that being blonde expanded their dating opportunities. One young woman attributed her dating popularity in high school to her hair color. She explained,

Because you get more attention, you have more experiences, more chances to do things. You get asked on more dates.

A young adult offered,

A lot of men I date are attracted to blondes, they just like the color, they just like the hair.

One of my boyfriends stated, 'If you didn't have blonde hair, I wouldn't have wanted to date you.'

Another respondent suggested,

I've had a lot of guys always say I like to date blondes, I don't really know why.

Another blonde stated,

My boyfriend said the first thing he noticed is the hair.

One respondent—acknowledging that it is all in good humor—stated,

My husband says he was looking for a blue-eyed blonde who could sing and settled for one of the three because I can't sing and I don't have blue eyes.

Various blonde women did feel that their hair was advantageous in securing—at least at the initial stage—male interest.

While most felt that "dumb blonde" syndrome was a serious burden in educational and work settings, ironically, at the same time, many felt that bloneness did positively shape employment opportunities, especially in occupations where appearance is an advantage. As an example, one woman hypothesized that as a waitress her tips were substantially better as a blonde than when she had dyed her hair brunette. Another woman explained her view that blondes had certain opportunities afforded to them, as follows:

I think it might depend on the occupation. In certain occupations, it is a distinct advantage. Any occupation where there is a certain kind of glitter—a high profile job in an upscale firm will have a blonde secretary—it is the image they are trying to project. If they're trying to project an image, they want a blonde. In terms of actresses, the fashion industry, public relations firms, or any job where the first person a client meets is the secretary, blondes are preferred. Being a blonde is a distinct advantage in getting the job, especially if it is a glitzy job.

Blonde women felt that opportunities in life surface solely based on their hair color.

Overall Perceptions and Self-Esteem of

Blonde Women

Krebs and Adinolfi analyzed the relationship between physical appearance and self as follows:

The causal sequence that seems most plausible is as follows; early in life physical attractiveness affects social realities, which in turn affects the development of personality. The physically attractive are admired and pursued. Because they are pursued, they develop a high level of self-esteem, which mediates the development of personality dispositions oriented toward ambition and success. (1975:252)

All in all, considering the advantages as well as the disadvantages, most blondes were content to be blonde, conceptualizing that it contributed to their sense of self. Cooley (1902) theorized that humans garner a sense of self based on their imagination of their appearance to others, their imagination of the judgment of others, and the feelings of self that subsequently arise. As many had received consistent positive attention and positive treatment from childhood through adulthood, many women maintained that blonde hair had contributed to their self-esteem, even if their self-esteem was not as high as it could have been due to the negative stereotypes of blonde women. Perhaps, that positive self-esteem mediated their ability to deal with the negativity. As one young woman said about the attention,

It was mostly positive; you're so beautiful. I had more confidence in my looks. You're so pretty. I wish I had your hair.

A blonde commented that her bloneness,

Makes me individual. I kind of stick out. I always thought of being individual as part of being special. I've always been a blonde and it's part of my identity. If I wasn't a blonde, it would be boring. I couldn't look at myself the same way. I might even act differently.

As another woman stated,

Starting as an adolescent, it was positive in feeling attractive.

One woman added,

Blonde, I like it. Maybe just because I was born with it. I like it. It's kind of light; there is a luster or radiance, the sunny quality, the lightening effect; the aura around your face.

Additionally, for many, their sense of self was correlated with being blonde and consequently, they were content with their hair color. As one woman noted,

I wouldn't feel like me if I dyed my hair brunette. I wouldn't feel my same vivacious self as a brunette that I do as a blonde.

She also added,

I'm happy with it. I like it. I like the attention, plus I think there are fewer blondes than brunettes—you're a smaller category, especially as adults. That is part of the attention. I like the attention. Who doesn't? It builds up your ego.

Another suggested,

I like the way people react to my hair and the way blondes are defined as attractive.

One young woman responded,

Blonde—that's what I am. Probably just because you know it's the beauty of society. You get the attention; it's a kind of challenge to make people see who you are. It's the challenge.

Finally, another stated simply and succinctly,

It's what God gave me.

All in all, the blonde women were content with their hair and usually developed a positive self-esteem in relation to their hair.

Blonde women are positive deviants. Blonde hair, on women, has culturally been defined as attractive and thus surpasses normative expectations in society. Also, blonde women are positively evaluated in that they receive positive attention and treatment because of their hair. Consequently, the women interviewed felt that blonde hair had contributed to positive self-esteem.

STIGMATIZATION OF BLONDE WOMEN Negative Reactions to Non-Conforming

Attributes or Behaviors

Positive deviants are not always uniformly treated in a positive manner; at times, they are stigmatized. As an example, Heckert & Heckert (2002) have suggested that rate-busting refers to over conformity that is negatively evaluated. An example would be a gifted child labeled as a nerd by peers. The process of stigmatization has previously been conceptualized in relation to differential evaluations over time; in other words, those presently deemed positive deviants have often been stigmatized and negatively evaluated in their own historical moment. As Heckert noted in relation to the relativity of positive deviance,

An action or behavior that is so defined in one era, society, or group, is often defined as a normative behavior (i.e., in a neutral manner) or even as negative deviance by another era, society, or group. (1989:136)

Thus, the French Impressionists were treated abysmally in their time and only later elevated to their current status. Geniuses were once defined as mad (Becker 1978). Merton (1968) hypothesized that rebels, revolutionaries, and nonconformists—maladapted to their times—often become the heroic figures of subsequent generations. Their heroism is rooted in their sagacious deviation. Coser (1967) suggested the same about innovators. Thus, deviance is clearly contextualized.

Furthermore, the application of positive and negative evaluations can often occur contemporaneously (Irwin 2003). Thus, over conformity is often subjected to stigmatization. Posner (1976:141) characterized excellence as a "mixed blessing" in that it is admired and stigmatized, at the same time. Wilkins also proposed the similarity between positive and negative deviants, in that positive deviants are often treated as if they were negative deviants,

All societies tend to reject deviants. Both saints and criminals have been excluded from the cultures into which they were born, and the majority of saints have suffered exactly similar fates to deviant sinners. (1965:171)

Scarpitti and McFarlane (1975) explained that beauty pageant winners are often treated with

both awe and jealousy. Freedman and Doob (1968) noted that highly intelligent people are often subjected to positive and negative evaluations; the appellations of "geek" and "nerd" attest to this treatment. Huryn (1986) found that gifted students were negatively evaluated by their peers with such stereotypes as unattractive and antisocial. Nevertheless, at the same time, their parents and teachers positively evaluated them. Steffensmeier and Terry (1975) posited the same point about the negative reaction to positive deviants in the case of a highly honored Congressional Medal of Honor winner who returned to the military after an unbearable visit to his hometown. Thus, attributes or behaviors are often simultaneously positively evaluated and negatively evaluated. Irwin (2003) noted that elite tattoo collectors are viewed as negative deviants to some and positive deviants to others. The same is true with blonde women. They have been elevated as emblems of beauty; they have also been subjected to negative evaluations, such as the societal view of their intelligence. A similar case exists with accomplished athletes, especially in relation to some sports, such as football (which can perhaps be partially accounted for by racism, as well), more than others. As athletes they are highly lauded and admired by a great portion of society; they have also been stereotyped (and stigmatized) as stupid.

Blonde Women and Negative Evaluations and Treatment

One method of examining the negative evaluations that transpire is through the reactivist, or labeling, paradigm. According to Schur (1971), stereotyping is one of the major processes by which deviants are labeled. Stereotyping constitutes the most significant feature of labeling and refers to the imputation of a constellation of images to the stereotyped. As in the case of a model minority (Fong 2002), where stereotypes are mixed but still serve to reinforce minority status, blondes too have been subject to mixed stereotypes. Nonetheless, the overall impact of mixed stereotyping is still to highlight the difference of the stereotyped group. These stereotypes constitute the core of negative attributions and thus, partial stigmatization, of blonde women.

Stereotypes of Blonde Women

Blonde women are very aware of the existence of stereotypes in society. Indeed, these stereotypes, created at a cultural level and acted on by individuals, have shaped some of their life experiences. The respondents analyzed various stereotypes. As many of these stereotypes simply had no relation to hair color, blonde haired women confront their hair as a master status (Hughes 1945).

Innocence

The image of blondes as pure or innocent is common. According to Juni and Roth (1985), blondes are over represented in the mythological/ethereal realm (princesses and fairies) and in the religious/spiritual realm (angels and saints). Synott (1987) noted that many blondes lose the intensity of their bloneness in the maturation process and that only an extraordinarily small percentage remains blonde as adults; thus, blonde locks are often associated with young children and the innocence of young children. Cooper (1971) maintained that innocence is a key stereotype of blondes and Ilyin (2000) argued that the innocent blonde is an archetype blonde, rooted in ancient mythology, and represented in the modern era by Princess Diana.

Various respondents also felt that a primary image of blondes is that of the innocent. As one respondent described her understanding of this image,

When I was little, they called me towhead. I thought they expected me to be good and sweet, that I was supposed to be a good girl. Also, that I was pretty.

A 62-year-old respondent noted about blonde hair,

It's fresh and young.

An adolescent described what she believed to be the expectations put on her bloneness,

I always thought that brown hair is sexy and blonde is angelic, the innocent type, good girl...feminine is powerless, blonde is more angelic. Brunettes are taken more seriously.

Another respondent stated

The girl next door type in World War II was portrayed as a blonde.

Another blonde young woman described her perceptions as follows,

Most adults think blonde little girls are associated with the perfect little girl, behave and act cute and smile. I received a lot of attention from my distant family. I put on a little show. Every angel, even dolls, are portrayed as blondes.

She felt Shirley Temple provided the quintessential portrayal of this image of blondes. Thus, various respondents felt that innocence is an image constructed by society about blondes.

Sexy/Fun

The imagery of blonde hair is complicated and even somewhat contradictory at times (Cooper 1971; Synott 1987). Thus, while blonde women have been portrayed as innocents, they have simultaneously been imagined to be sexier than other women. Mass media has further enhanced this image in that entertainment sex symbols throughout the twentieth century were vastly and disproportionately blonde (Synott 1987). Synott further notes

Blonde and dark hair are polarized as socially opposite, fun and power, and they evoke startlingly different aesthetic and stereotypical reactions. (1987:388)

Blonde women in this sample also felt that an image of blonde women is that blondes are sexier and because of that social construction, blondes have more fun. As one respondent explained,

Blondes have more fun. I think it relates to the fact that blondes are seen as more sexy or attractive; their self-esteem allows them to have more fun, they have a better feeling about themselves.

Another woman suggested,

I like the way people react to my hair and the way blondes are defined as attractive. I think a lot has to do with the media. Blondes have more fun, Marilyn Monroe, in that era... all the movie stars are blonde. The image of

the blonde as a sex goddess seems to hang on.

Another commented,

I associate blonde with the beach type that likes to play.

Another stated,

Blondes are more fun, have a good time, don't care about anything; just out to have fun.

One respondent explained

A myth is that blondes have more fun. It is from that expression blonde bombshell.

Another related,

That's how a guy describes a nice-looking sexually attractive woman. Blonde is defined as the sexiest. It just seems like that's the norm, that's the way. Men say this.

Another respondent commented that an advertising campaign in the 1960's had utilized the slogan "blondes have more fun" and the idea became commonly accepted in the United States. The respondents universally felt that this was a predominant image of blondes.

Easy

Because the image that blondes have more fun and are sexier is common in society, some blondes felt that society also constructed a stereotype of blondes as easy. As one respondent connected this stereotype with the previous one,

Blondes are more sexy and this leads to the idea in men's heads, that blondes are more fun in bed.

One woman simply stated that an image of blondes is that of "trashy." A respondent simply stated,

I think I get more advances for one-night stands than a brunette.

Not liking that type of attention, she added,

It's always nice for a guy to come and ap-

proach you...but the end result, I'm so afraid I put off that bad vibe, I want people to approach me, but I don't want them to approach because you know what is going to happen.

Another proffered that the image of blondes is

Sexy, dumb, little slow in understanding concepts, easy in bed and to get in the sack.

Another noted that the image of a blonde is that of a "sex kitten." A respondent commented:

Yes, when I met my first husband, it was beatnik culture, where blondes were stereotyped as dumber and more money grubbing and disgusting than most women. Blonde women were treated as sex things. If a beatnik was going to get involved for a long period of time, it would be a brunette, not a blonde. I was treated like a bubble-headed blonde by friends of my first husband. All his friends freaked out, couldn't understand why he was involved with [me] ...[they] said it was the hair color. I dyed my hair medium-deep brown and they treated me differently. They labeled me as stupid, not labeled as sexually loose—everyone was in this culture—blondes were for temporary sexual use, brunettes for long-term sexual use.

Another respondent suggested that an image of the blonde is a woman who is

Putting out, not a seductress, easy for being too stupid to get themselves out of situations.

She remembered a man offering to escort her to a submarine base at a landlocked university town, which she felt was indicative of and based on this stereotype. Another respondent commented,

Men have told me, 'If I didn't know you, I would think you're easy because you have blonde hair.'

All in all, many blondes feel that an image constructed of them in society is easy sexual availability; paradoxically, blondes are also assumed to be innocent.

Dumbness/Stupidity

Blonde hair has been severely stigmatized in that the negative stereotype of stupidity has been attached to blonde women. According to Synott,

Blonde and dark hair are polarized as socially opposite, fun and power...Indeed they are the symbolic equivalent of the gender colours of pink and blue. (1987:388)

Part of this cultural designation of femininity for blonde women has been the connotation of purity (artistically and symbolically presented by an over representation of blonde angels), which is perhaps the basis of the negative aspersions cast on the intelligence of blonde women. Cooper commented,

The aesthetic quality of fair hair or something shining and pure like a flame, or precious like gold...It is possible to argue that purity implies innocence, innocence may mean ignorance and ignorance denotes stupidity. (1971:76)

The dumb blonde thus emerged and is strongly rooted in modern culture. Various entertainment figures have claimed the role of the dumb blonde (Goldie Hawn, Suzanne Somers, Lisa Kudrow) and popularized the notion in popular culture. Certainly this stereotype looms large as is evidenced by the popularity of dumb blonde jokes. On web sites (Funny Jokes.Com 2002), hundreds of dumb blonde jokes are offered to the public, including the following:

Why do blondes drive BMWs? It's the only car name they can spell. What do you call a blonde between two brunettes? A mental block. How do you make a blonde's eyes light up? Shine a flashlight in their ear. Why should blondes not be given coffee breaks? It takes too long to retrain them. Why don't blondes eat Jello? They can't figure out how to get two cups of water into those little packages. How do blonde brain cells die? Alone. What do you call a blonde with half a brain? Gifted.

The ubiquitousness and popularity of these jokes attest to the strength of this particular stereotype.

Gendered relations must be considered in that the creation of the stereotype of the

dumb blonde exists in the context of a more neutral conceptualization of the intelligence of blonde men. As Brownmiller (1984:71) concludes, "dumb blonde is practically one word on the lips of some people." In a culture where—according to Synott (1987)—dark hair is viewed as masculine (and powerful) and blonde hair is constructed as feminine (and fun), blonde women thus become even less symbolic of the characteristic of intelligence which was already presumed by sexism—under traditional gender definitions—to be more consistent with masculinity.

The blondes in this sample were quite cognizant of this cultural stereotype. This imagery permeates societal perceptions of blondes; obviously, blondes feel shaped by this stereotype. Blondes confront this image early in life and certainly prior to adulthood. As a 12-year-old explained,

They think that blondes are dumb, because there are so many brunettes and hardly any redheads, so they pick on blondes. They [brunettes and redheads] are taken more seriously and if they make a dumb mistake, they don't make fun of you, but if you're a blonde, they like to do that.

She stated that many dumb blonde jokes had been directed her way, including the following,

If a brunette and a blonde jumped off the Empire State Building, who would get there first? The brunette, the blonde would have to stop and ask directions.

Referring specifically to brunettes, she further defined her experiences,

Well, they don't have to put up with dumb blonde jokes when they make a dumb mistake. It's sort of bothersome. I would like people to make dumb brunette jokes. They like to pick on someone and it is easy [i.e., to single out the blondes].

An adolescent respondent noted that she dealt with the stereotype every day of her life, through various actions and attitudes of her boss, friends, brother, and boyfriend. Other blondes variously expressed their understanding of the imagery of blondes in relation to intelligence. One woman felt that perhaps it was rooted in other assumptions

about blondes,

Flighty...we're all superficial and only care about our looks and we don't have any brains.

Another adolescent related that others would say to her, "You're trying to be all ditzy and you're definitely blonde" or in response to certain situations, "That was a blonde statement." One respondent noted the fact that she was "outgoing, bubbly, and friendly" and was often considered ditzy based solely on her bloneness. She recounted an incident in a barbeque restaurant when she was in a vivacious mood but simply could not decide what to order. At that particular point, her son concluded she was behaving in a "ditzy" manner. She believed that a brunette acting in the same fashion would have been differentially interpreted—and assumptions about intelligence would not have been made—and she observed,

A brunette would not be considered ditzy—how often do you hear that ditzy brunette—always a ditzy blonde.

One young woman stated,

I definitely think they're not seen as smart or as having much common sense, ditzy, with their head in the clouds. I don't know who started it. I'd like to have a talk with that person. It was just passed along.

As a 66-year-old woman explained:

You have the dumb blonde thing. Some people stereotype that all blondes are dumb. Perhaps from Marilyn Monroe, I don't know. I never heard it when I was a kid. They often portray secretaries as dumb blondes, that the bosses pick their secretaries for their looks and they're actually dumb. I don't think it is true in real life, just a portrayal; a myth.

Thus, all of the blondes in this sample had encountered this particular stereotype.

The women interviewed in this sample conceptualized the "dumb blonde" as a complex construction in that it includes dizziness—or ditziness—and mental lack of intelligence. One aspect of the "dumb blonde" is that of dizziness. As one respondent ex-

pressed the stereotype, blondes are perceived as

...flighty, not really dumb, but more air headed.

In an analysis of how men responded to her in high school, a young adult respondent explained,

They saw me as attractive. But if you make a silly comment, it is easy for them to say that's a ditz blonde comment. It was just supposed to be funny.

Noting that she was actually shy, she further noted about her adult experiences,

I hate to think that I act ditz. I don't even think I even have that ditz side of me. But it has been attributed to me.

A 24-year-old stated that the cultural image is that

They [blondes] don't have an attention span longer than a second.

Another young woman commented,

Bubble-headed blonde says it all. People think blondes are stupid, not intellectual stupidity, but too stupid to flush the toilet, daily life stupidity.

As another woman expressed this phenomenon in relation to media portrayals,

When I was growing up, the stars I wanted to pattern my life after were Doris Day—the ditz blonde, the girl next door, light hearted, very gay, always seeming to be needing male guidance because she had to be saved from herself and her ditziness—and Katherine Hepburn, as a lawyer in one movie.

Another young respondent stated that the dumb blonde was one who

can't concentrate, no goals, floats around in the world.

One respondent further clarified her understanding of what society meant by the dumb blonde when she hypothesized the follow-

ing typology; ditz, as personified by Goldie Hawn or Suzanne Somers, refers to a "behavior, a way of acting" and an air head, as metaphorically represented by Lisa Kudrow, points to a smart woman and "a lack of acting." In other words, the air head (like the quintessential "absent-minded professor") is perhaps contemplating quantum mechanics and is simply distracted. Nevertheless, this myth, or cultural construction, permeates society and blonde women understand the inherent difficulties they confront because of it. Clearly, an important aspect of the social construction of the "dumb blonde" as perceived by blondes is the light, ditz quality.

However, the "ditz" aspect of the dumb blonde is not sufficient to completely explain the phenomenon as more negative attributes of mental intelligence overtly and covertly accompany the lighter aspect of this cultural construction. A young woman presented her perception that brunettes would have a distinct advantage in attaining an employment opportunity as they are viewed as simultaneously more intelligent and more serious, by stating,

I think when you go for a job interview they look at what you look like. The initial reality is that different stereotypes would pop in your mind. Blondes are more fun and flighty. Brunettes are the opposite.

A college student recalled that in high school, if she asked a question in class, teachers would say,

You're stupid and make negative comments.

When a teacher dismissed her on that basis, she was unwilling to ask questions about the course material and had to rely on her friends for further elaboration. In a lengthy analysis, one woman described the complicated connection with this stereotype and her educational process as follows:

Yeah, I got more attention. For me, personally, the issue had to do with intelligence. By high school, I rejected the attention, because along with it came the stupidity assumption. I was running into it in high school, but from men, not from teachers, not from girls. They were not treating me like I was stupid due to my school work. But when interacting with them, I got images of stupidity. I got all

A's. My teachers treated me like I was smart. I ran into stereotypes when I started dating. It was not connected to my school work until college. It was just something the guys I dated did. When I got to college, it included my teachers, women around me and the men around me. Men were not just treating me like I was stupid, like I couldn't figure out how to wash the dishes. They thought I must be getting poor grades. Once I was on a double date, with all freshmen and sophomores, and someone asked what I got on my Psych mid-term. I said I got an A. Everyone laughed and said like you would get good grades. They assumed that I got poor grades. From that point on, I had to work against it—that people thought I was stupid—never in kindergarten through twelfth grade. It really became an issue and it interfered with my ability to interact with teachers and students and I was having trouble getting teachers to take me seriously. I dealt with it in graduate school. By then I was more conscious of it. Two or three years after I started graduate school, my hair darkened. I was happy and very aware that people took me more seriously. That part of the stereotype is more problematic. In dating it was easy to weed out the idiots. But within academia it was much harder to get past dealing with professors and fellow graduate students.

Recounting her numerous post-baccalaureate degrees (an M.A., a Ph.D., a J.D.) as well as her professional accomplishments, one respondent referred to an extremely difficult work situation in which a woman with professional power over her, had on numerous occasions called her derisive names; appellations based on her hair color:

After all these years of work...to have someone reduce all of your accomplishments by using a term like blondie. It is galling, particularly galling that she's a woman. It's bad when men do it, but women should know better. To reduce someone's whole being to bloneness is terrible. The implication is that you got where you are, not due to hard work, but to bloneness is idiotic, its pathetic to have one characteristic become the defining characteristic of your life. The demeaning stereotypes don't reflect what you are as a person, a living, breathing person with your own problems.

Another woman noted,

It's hard to get past looks. It's hard for blondes to show who they are. Brunettes have an easier time. People don't look at them that way. People can look at the person more than the look. Blondes have to get past the looks to have people look at them as a person.

Thus, all of the blonde women felt that the imagery of blondes as dumb was more than just a perception of ditziness. That image also included an element of an attribution of lesser intelligence that mediated the manner in which other people interacted with them in an educational or occupational setting.

This particular study was part of a larger study in which brunette women and red-headed women (and men) were interviewed. No brunette mentioned lower intelligence as a stereotype regarding themselves (although many mentioned it as a stereotype of blondes). For example, a 40-year-old brunette woman responded that she could only describe stereotypes of brunettes by a process of elimination (i.e., not redheaded nor blonde). She stated that

Blondes are dumber, redheads are smart and sexually vivacious, brunettes are smarter, steadier, and not sexually overt.

Furthermore, a 31-year-old brunette (with a Ph.D. in Analytical Chemistry) referred to a situation in which she dyed her hair blonde—temporarily—and then found she did not fit what she believed to be the normal brunette stereotype of "solid, hard working...intelligent" as follows:

For a while, I used artificial enhancements (color) on my hair and pushed myself over the edge from a light brunette to a blonde. I did discover even people who knew me as a brunette suddenly started to treat me as if I was thirty points lower in intelligence. A fellow chemist knew me as a brunette. He always had somewhat of a condescending air toward me, and when I lightened my hair, that attitude became even more pronounced, like telling me he wouldn't drive the car until I fastened my seat belt and treating me as if I were twelve.

It is also interesting to note, that if anything, the perception of redheads—regarding societal imagery—is that they are smart (Heckert & Best 1997) and Synott (1987) concluded that the accomplished executive is a common imagery of redheaded women. Clearly, gendered relations might impact the scenario whereby—due to patriarchal constructions—women more often have to prove intelligence than do men. Nevertheless, the brunette and redheaded women interviewed as a part of the larger study felt that this stereotype was pertinent to blonde women and not to themselves. Furthermore, the culturally constructed stereotype is dumb blonde and not dumb brunette or dumb redhead. While blonde men were not interviewed for this study—and it would appear that the societal construction of the dumb blonde is most readily interpreted as a dumb blonde woman—a similar study of blonde men would be important in terms of providing a comparison group.

In summary, stereotypes of blonde women, as perceived by the blonde respondents, were varied and inconsistent. As blonde women experienced stereotyping, the most important ones were the blonde as innocent, sexy/more fun, easy, and stupid. As these stereotypes had little to do with hair color, in many ways, they constitute a master status (Hughes 1945).

Coping with Attributions of Stupidity

Labeling theory has allowed sociologists to examine the impact that labels, including stereotypes, have on those that are labeled (Erikson 1964; Lemert 1972; Tannenbaum 1980). A stereotype that is as profound and permeating as lesser mental ability is clearly consequential and similar to African-Americans, blondes may be subject to "stereotype vulnerability" (Lovaglia, Lucas, Houser, Thye & Markovsky 1998). The treatment of others is consequential to those stereotyped in relation to intelligence, as the Pygmalion effect has long claimed (Rosenthal & Jacobsen 1992). Further, self-image is likely to be impacted especially in the guise of self-efficacy, or the "*beliefs or conceptions* about personal capability" (Lovaglia et al 1998:205). Thus, while blondes develop good overall self-esteem due to their status as positive deviants, this stereotype is clearly capable of negatively impacting self-efficacy. That blondes develop coping mechanisms is indicative

that societal stereotypes do threaten their self-efficacy.

Alone, individuals do not have the ability to change societal stereotypes; even collectively, societal stereotypes are difficult to change. Coping mechanisms are perhaps the way that people deal with stereotypes; indeed, blonde women developed various strategies by which they responded to the "dumb blonde" stereotype. The necessity for creating coping mechanisms is strong. Empirical evidence suggests that employers might perceive women applicants for a professional position that are brunette more favorably than they would blondes or redheads (Kyle & Mahler 1996). College students reviewed resumes (photographs included) of an applicant for an accounting position and they were more willing to hire the brunette and they were more willing to offer the brunette a higher starting salary. The implications of the continued persistence of stereotypes are profound, especially in conjunction with continued wage discrimination against women. Blonde and redheaded women face even more significant challenges and the stereotypes of blonde women as dumb and redheaded women as tempestuous, are not insignificant, and according to this research, are not inconsequential.

Thus, in the context of this societal and cultural backdrop, women develop coping mechanisms, some of which are more effective at achieving professional aims than others. Methods that the blonde women in this sample utilized included the following: not taking the stereotype seriously (ignoring or joking about the stereotype); taking on the role (allowing a self-fulfilling prophecy to occur); overcompensating by diminishing any of their personality characteristics that could in any way be construed as characteristics of the societal imagery of blondes (the ice princess); fighting back by attempting to demonstrate their intelligence; and passing (dyeing their hair so as to be perceived as a member of the dominant group). Every woman interviewed utilized at least one of these coping mechanisms. Most of the respondents in this sample would use more than one coping mechanism; their response depended on the circumstances of the situation and their particular mood or understanding of how best to deal with the situation.

Ignoring or Joking (Not Taken Seriously)

One way that some blonde women react to the societal constructions of blondes as dumb is to ignore comments or to not take them seriously by returning the joke. As one respondent described her reactions,

If they are ignorant and they are just joking and don't see it gets to me, I just walk away. I just can't change everybody.

As an adolescent commented,

Most people just say it when they are teasing you, so just ignore it. If I make a mistake and somebody calls you a dumb blonde, I say look who is talking (only if they're blonde). If it is a brunette, I will joke back by saying, 'You're dumb too.' I say it jokingly, so they know I'm joking. People don't really think I'm stupid unless I'm acting crazy. I don't try to prove anything.

A college student also adopted this same stance, reporting:

If someone has a blonde joke they tell me. I think they're funny [yet at the same time, I think] they're so ridiculous, not even funny. I've never seen a blonde so stupid; how many blondes does it take to put in a light bulb, so ridiculous. I don't feel I'm one of the stereotyped blondes so I can laugh. Athletic blondes don't tend to be perceived as typical blondes. If somebody is so serious about blondes being stupid, I just laugh at them. I don't take them seriously. I know so many blondes that aren't stupid. That is not serious.

A 20-year-old female explained,

Jokes have been told on me and have no effect on me whatsoever. They tell me a blonde joke like they would tell a brunette. Some blondes are deeply impacted. They get hurt, for some reason. I've never taken them seriously.

A 16-year-old ranked in the top ten in her class, noted:

I would try to speak my mind and act on my intelligence and they'd [classmates] say you're just a dumb blonde. I'd just ignore it. I'd laugh at their ignorance and say they

don't know what they're talking about. I never let it affect me—laughing at them inside myself—just look at them and keep on going; just don't acknowledge it; just go in with your life. They don't deserve the credit—don't respond—no reason to fight fire with other fire. They stop if you ignore them.

One woman noted that she often joked around as a response to the condescension of others. She did suggest, however, that there was a line that could be crossed into hurtful behavior; at that point, she chose to ignore the comments,

If it's hurtful, I ignore it. Whatever I might say isn't going to change their mind.

As such, some blonde women always or sometimes choose to simply ignore or not take the phenomenon seriously.

Self-fulfilling Prophecy

Erikson (1964) noted that labeling can serve as a powerful basis for self-fulfilling prophecies, or that stereotyped people can simply act out the role. While preferring to ignore the stereotype, a college student noted about other women,

I do know some women who do it [play out the role] for the attention. They would do it for the attention. They acted out the role. That's what people were looking for and that draws attention to yourself.

Insisting that it was accidental, one woman acknowledged that she has utilized the role, primarily because she feels it makes others happy. She explained:

I just am myself. I just act like I am whether there is a stereotype about me or not. I can remember a colleague [in a professional position] saying she's either the smartest person I ever knew or the dumbest. They probably thought I could play the dumb role well. Maybe sometimes but not intentionally, I do dumb things sometimes. I'm not trying to but people think I am possibly because I am blonde. I just laugh it off. It makes me feel smart because I know I'm not dumb. They're the dumb ones for assuming such nonsense. It's not serious. It's just fun. It makes people laugh. That sounds pretty good. It is the easiest way to make people laugh and

happy because I can't tell jokes. I've doubted my intelligence not based on how people treat me but because things I've failed at.

One blonde noted,

Every once in a while, I'm just trying to be funny, acting stupid. They expect me to be stupid, why not feed their little stupid stereotype?

An adolescent suggesting that she mostly fights back by saying "I'm at the top of my class" but occasionally, "I'll play along and say, yeah, I'm a ditz, but it gets my defenses up." As the social construction permeates society, the enactment of the role then becomes a possibility for blondes so labeled. Sometimes, they opt for that role.

Overcompensating (Including Taking on the Ice Princess Role)

Another potential manner in which the stereotype can be confronted is for an individual to choose to deliberately diminish within herself any characteristics that might allow others to label her as a dumb blonde. The "ice princess" is another iconic image that has evolved for blondes and an image that has been associated with movie portrayals, by actresses such as Grace Kelly and Sharon Stone. The "ice princess" is the polar opposite of the dumb blonde and is perhaps a definitive rebuke and reaction to the stereotype. A respondent explained:

It could be my perceiving people's reaction. I thought I was always more cautious, guarded in a professional environment, trying to maintain a distance between me and male mentors, bending over backwards to be distant. Part of it was a feeling that any behavior less than extremely professional all the time would be interpreted as ditzy blonde...I think you're conscious that people will stereotype you as a dumb blonde. You have to make a conscious decision to play into it or resist it. You're afraid when you meet someone that they stereotype you as dumb or witless based on what you look like. You practice restraining behavior; you're not as extroverted, spirited as you might be. You become restrained or too restrained for your own good.

Speculating that these reasons were the ex-

planation of the development in many blonde women of the ice princess persona, she continued,

A lot of attractive blondes don't want to be stereotyped and so overcompensate; they don't want to be stereotyped as dumb or taking advantages of good looks, so you're much more conscious of your behaviors. If you're rebelling against stereotypes, you're much more restrained.

An adolescent, ranked number one in her high school class, stated:

Sometimes, I act more serious, so I don't get thought of as ditzy. At school, a lot of people think I'm serious and I'm not at all. If I'm bouncing around like I usually do, people will think I'm dumb (ditzy). If you get desperate and need to and you think it's the only way you can get what you need, you just act like you're a dumb ditz...mistake. You're not taken as seriously, so you have to try twice as hard to be serious and it's not fun being serious, but you have to be taken seriously. Around people I know I will act naturally; around people I don't know, I have to act serious and boring—blah.

Another blonde reported that a way to fight the societal image was to act and think like a man, at least in her professional capacity. She stated that this was one option as she knew that one avenue open to her was to use her sex appeal; if that failed to function for her, then an additional route was to figure out how a man would succeed in the scenario and conquer the professional obstacle from that frame of reference. In other words, she felt that if she could be seen as one of the guys, rather than a blonde woman, her blonde hair would not be hazardous for her in her professional capacity. She explained that she would often establish her credentials and would also engage in serious discussions about current sports events, specifically so that co-workers would forget she was a blonde woman and thus, take her seriously and treat her in a professional manner. She presented a scenario in which a boss—an Air Force Colonel—was not treating her in a professional way (and which she felt was related to her hair color). She proceeded to analyze the situation and decided if she would act like a man, she would be

taken seriously. Consequently, she approached her boss and informed him, "I know the government, I know the military" and asked him to pile on extra work and she would successfully complete all the work he needed done. She stated that the transformation occurred almost instantaneously in that she was treated as a serious and respected co-worker. Curiously, perhaps engaging in behavior that could lead to labels, including the ice princess role, is the surest way to avoid the label of dumb blonde. Indeed, it is a very interesting sociological phenomenon that the one way to avoid a label is to engage in compensatory behaviors that create another label.

Fighting Back

The reaction to dealing with the stereotyping process that was most commonly mentioned by the women in this sample consisted of fighting back. This response ranged from the confrontational to the subtle. For one woman, this fighting back included the possibility of confrontations. She stated,

I developed a mouth. I didn't attempt to maximize blondeness by what I did and the way I dressed. I tried to downplay blonde hair. My father taught me to offset these stereotypes...You can do a lot with your mouth to offset images. Mouthy, aggressive women don't fit the image of blondeness.

Another respondent proclaimed that inside every blonde woman (presumed by others to be happy-go-lucky and bubbly) was a harder woman, angry and frustrated over her lack of control over situations in which other people made unwarranted presumptions solely based on hair color; this harder woman was willing to stand up and emit "messages, I'm strong, independent, don't mess with me." However, the major method of fighting back was subtler; respondents informed others of their intelligence. A young woman analyzed this strategy as follows,

I definitely try to prove them wrong. In high school, I was always teased. When class ranks came out, I would use it to prove I wasn't as stupid as they think. I would always say something; they would take it the wrong way and say, DUH, that was stupid. I would prove I was smart.

Another young woman explained this adaptation,

I've always been athletic and a blonde; dumb jock, dumb blonde. I've always tried hard to show people I'm not dumb or stupid. In school, I got better grades, just trying to fit in and talk like I'm not stupid. I've always been quiet—my grades were good—just me. I don't know if I think people would perceive me as stupid.

A respondent commented,

When they don't expect me to say more than two syllable words...they start to talk, explain simple things to me. I'll say, 'I do know how it works. I have an education. I have an IQ higher than my shoe size.'

Another woman stated,

I keep getting degrees. Maybe if I say it loud enough [4.0 GPA] to my family, they'll get the word out.

A 16-year-old high school student commented,

It is one of the things that makes me want to do well in school, to strive, to prove you are not a dumb blonde, do well in school, get an A on a test.

In fact, she attributed her academic motivation to her hair color. After delivering an intense and heart-felt monologue about the shabby treatment of blondes based on the "dumb blonde" phenomenon, a 12-year-old respondent was asked if there are any role models for blondes. Interpreting this question from her perspective, her reply—"Einstein, because he is smart"—in a nutshell, summarizes this reaction. At the same time, many blonde women do feel that at some level, they have to prove their intelligence to be accepted as intelligent; with another hair color they would not have to prove that intelligence, as an assumption of intelligence would be granted unless they demonstrated otherwise. One woman hypothesized,

I don't know if it is taken more seriously when people are dealing with a brunette or a redhead; they withhold judgment until after they have the opportunity to see the

person. When dealing with a blonde, she has to go the extra mile to prove she's not dumb. Brunettes and redheads don't have a presumption to overcome. People see them as an individual.

Another woman also echoed this same thought, in response to a question regarding whether brunettes had any advantages over blondes, when she stated,

Smartness. It is hard to get past looks. It's hard for blondes to show who they are. Brunettes have an easier time. People don't look at them that way. People can look at the person more than the looks. Blondes have to get past the looks to have people look at them as a person...It's kind of a challenge to make people see who you are.

Consequently, in many ways, the women in this sample do note a clear cultural disadvantage, based solely on their hair color.

Passing

A final potential strategy for dealing with a stereotype is to "pass"; one woman in this sample utilized passing as a way to overcome her societal treatment. Clearly, brunettes are the numerical majority and the standard in this society and stereotypical imagery does not exist for brunettes in the way in which it does for blondes and redheads. Joining the majority group precludes the application of negative stereotypes and negative treatment based on those stereotypes; one woman chose this option. As she explained,

At one point, I dyed my hair. In high school, I would try to lighten my hair. After I dyed my hair brown, since then, I have never tried to lighten my hair. I avoided anything that would get it lighter.

She also related an incident in which she demanded that her hairdresser stop using a certain chemical on her hair as it also had the unintended consequence of lightening her hair. To become the standard mitigates the application of negative imagery. As a more subtle form of passing—and becoming less discreditable (Goffman 1963)—one respondent noted that by wearing glasses she was less likely to be miscast in the dumb blonde role. Glasses metaphorically represent intelligence. Another form of passing

also involved mitigating the impact of blonde hair by cutting it to a shorter length. A 36-year-old respondent, working in a defense-related industry, noted that she had never met one other blonde woman that said that being blonde was easy. As an example, she pointed to a former co-worker who was experiencing a very difficult time being taken seriously in her work. She purposely cut her hair to a much shorter length and specifically stated that she had cut her hair so that she might be deemed more professional and more competent. All in all, while not often used by the women in this sample, passing represents another way to cope with the stigma of the dumb blonde.

In essence, the complex stereotype of the "dumb blonde" is a potent molder of blonde women. Not just passive recipients of societal forces, constructions, and reactions, these blonde women actively created various strategies to respond to this profoundly negative and threatening stigmatization. Yet the mere fact that they had to create coping mechanisms attests to the marginalization they experience in society in relation to assumptions about their intelligence.

Worsened Relationships with Women

Various women mentioned that their perception was that blonde hair had negatively impacted their relationships with other women. This finding is particularly striking due to the fact that a specific question on this topic had not been asked. Their perception is consistent with the finding of Krebs and Adinolfi (1975) that the physically attractive do experience a disadvantage. That disadvantage is a tendency to be rebuffed by other individuals of the same sex. Societal constructions of gender are quite pertinent, as well. Appearance norms govern the lives of women more than men and women are more likely to be judged on the basis of appearance (Schur 1983). Thus, women deemed to surpass normative expectations are especially likely to be negatively assessed. The beautiful woman becomes the idealization "against which all women will be judged" (Chapkin 1986:14); consequently, appearance competition emerges and assessment of appearance mediates the comfort level of women's relationships with other women (Orbach 1978). As Brownmiller noted, the

struggle to approach the feminine ideal, to

match the femininity of other women and especially to outdo them, is the chief competitive arena...in which the American woman is wholeheartedly encouraged to contend. (1984:70)

This factor might be exacerbated by the findings of Jacobi and Cash (1992) that amongst their sample of American white college students, women were significantly more likely to think that men preferred blonde women than the men, in the same sample, reported preferring blonde women. In this context, blonde women experience more difficult relationships with other women. As friendships are very important in human life, this consequence is surely negative.

Various women described this scenario. As one woman portrayed her understanding of her life scenarios,

I can remember getting venom from brunettes; plenty of nasty comments, you've got blonde hair, the package. Plenty of women let me know I had the package—petite blonde woman. I don't have that much in common with other blondes, other than the snide barbs we receive. I let them go. They [brunettes] see that men respond to them as not blonde.

Another woman reported that other women, who do not have blonde hair, consistently asked "Is it real?" which she interpreted as negative commentary rooted in interpersonal jealousy. During her high school experience, a brunette adolescent had asked her, "Which box does it come from?" and simply would not believe the response that it was a natural hair color. Also, an adolescent noted,

Girls, have told me, I wish I had your hair and ask, do blondes have more fun?

Another woman suggested,

The better friends weren't jealous, but females were jealous.

A 21-year-old woman hypothesized,

Women tend to be more jealous, but still see them [blondes] as more attractive.

According to a 20-year-old female,

That's how a guy describes a nice-looking sexually attractive woman. Blonde is defined as the sexiest. It just seems like that's the norm, that's the way. Men say this. Women degrade blondes, they're jealous, they do the blonde jokes, say that they're not as smart because they accept the societal standard. It often makes one feel better when a guy describes a woman as attractive that way.

As a 20-year-old commented,

Long blonde haired women are considered attractive by men. They [non-blonde women] get a little jealous of them [blonde women]. Blondes get a lot of attention from men because they are society's little Barbie doll...perfect women. It's what men look for.

One respondent, noting that other hair color did not elicit as much attention as hers, pointed to a female friend who would not go out with her because men were more commonly drawn to her and stated,

It is easier to be friends with a blonde. There isn't as much competition. We don't feel we have to compete with each other.

Another respondent suggested,

The competition between women is awful...Men have a tendency to like blondes better...it's the hair color that attracts a man ...other women are jealous.

She further added that she was so delighted to have recently become a best friend to another woman, because for many years all of her friends had been men and she felt it was out of necessity due to other women treating her poorly. Finally, another woman assessed her negative adolescent relationships with other women—which she believed was linked to her hair color—as follows:

I was viewed as pretty. I did experience jealousy and competition for attention from guys. It wasn't really evident at a younger age. As I got older, I didn't have friendships based on trust. They were always jealous. At cheerleader tryouts, another girl said she didn't care if she didn't make it just as long as she beat me. It's sad that people are stereotyped on the basis of their hair color.

It's harder to have female friends. I have a lot more male friends. Blonde females are generally treated better by males. I can relate more closely with a blonde. Brunettes are more likely to be jealous.

Clearly, many respondents perceived that their relationships with other women had been hampered by their hair color.

All in all, blonde women are also negatively evaluated and treated. Various stereotypes create a cultural image packaging of blondes as innocent, easy, sexy, and dumb. Blondes experience the negative situation of having to construct coping mechanisms to deal with the last stereotype. Further, many of the blondes interviewed felt that other women treated them poorly.

CONCLUSIONS

A 16-year-old blonde observed,

I'd rather be looked at as what I am.

Nevertheless, the imagery of blondes is powerful and blondes are clearly molded by societal/cultural imagery. A qualitative study of blonde women highlights the complexity of reactions to the same attribute. Blonde women surpass culturally created appearance norms and are both positively and negatively evaluated. As positive deviants, blonde women interviewed for this study felt that society and culture had bestowed upon them an advantage in relation to definitions of attractiveness. Thus, they received much positive attention and positive treatment. At the same time, blonde women are also stigmatized. The blondes interviewed for this study felt that the various stereotypes of blondes—as they had experienced them—included the following: innocence, sexy/more fun, easy, and stupid. A negative experience emerged in that as a reaction to the stereotype of the “dumb blonde” they felt the need to develop coping mechanisms (including ignoring/joking, fulfilling the prophecy, overcompensating, fighting back, and passing). Many felt that their relationships with women were negatively impacted by their blonde hair. Clearly, blonde women receive contradictory evaluations.

Future research may highlight complex reactions. Do other forms of deviance simultaneously receive both positive and negative evaluations? If so, why are they subjected to varying reactions? For example, future study

might focus on the case of gifted children and their experience of simultaneously being considered positive deviants by adults and rate-busters by peers. How does this dual response impact their shared reality? In relation to sports, successful athletes (especially football players) are both positive deviants and rate-busters. They over conform to athletic accomplishment and are positively evaluated and lauded by society. At the same time, the portrayal of the “dumb jock” is ubiquitous in this society. How do accomplished athletes deal with these competing images?

As a side note, many people (based on categories) are not assumed to be less intellectually gifted by others, unless they prove themselves to be less intellectually gifted. Yet, in the case of some categories, including athletic ability (especially football players), blonde hair color, minority status and Appalachian origin, this is not the case. On the basis of these statuses, attributions of a lessened mental ability have been culturally created and sustained. Thus, individuals within these categories are faced with the daunting task of proving their intelligence in the context of a society that is all too willing to dismiss their intelligence. The overwhelming inability of society—and many people socialized within that society—to eradicate these stereotypes is all too consequential to individuals who occupy one of those statuses. Further research on how stereotyped individuals cope with this intellectual marginalization, would be very beneficial, indeed.

All in all, blonde women receive mixed blessings from society.

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