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## Great expectations: gender, looks and lookism at work

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**Abstract:** Drawing on archival data of employment discrimination from the Victorian Equal Opportunity and Human Rights Commission in Australia, this article examines the issue of employee looks, women and lookism in interactive service work. From existing research on emotional and aesthetic labour, lookism might be expected to occur primarily in services and primarily involve female workers. The findings suggest that these expectations are largely met. However, the data also reveal that men in services also claim lookism and that lookism extends beyond interactive services into other industries such as manufacturing. This article concludes by discussing the implications of these unexpected findings for the study of lookism.

**Keywords:** aesthetic labour; emotional labour; interactive service work; lookism; gender.

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## 1 Introduction

Awareness and analysis of the body was limited in research on interactive service jobs but is now becoming more prominent. A key reason is that the once dominant research paradigm of emotional labour is being complemented by that of aesthetic labour. Emotional labour centres on the commodification of employee feelings. Although recognising the body work through which these feelings are manifest, this body work is quickly retired analytically by both Hochschild (1983) and subsequent researchers (for a discussion, see Witz et al., 2003). Aesthetic labour centres on the commodification of employee corporeality and, as such, the concept intentionally and explicitly recuperates the body work involved in interactive services. It also helps explain why employers attempt to control and transmute the physical looks of employees and how lookism – or employment discrimination based on employee looks – can be an issue in interactive services.

Although aesthetic labour complements emotional labour and is a useful extension in analysis of interactive service work, there is also a common argument in some accounts of both forms of labour that its provision rests on the feminine 'naturalness' of women (cf. Hochschild, 1983; Tyler and Taylor, 1998). As a consequence, lookism is expected to be more likely to occur for female workers in interactive service work.

An opportunity to test these expectations occurs through analysis of the archival cases of enquiries and complaints about lookism in employment lodged with the Equal Opportunity Commission (Victoria) (EOC) – now known as the Victorian Equal Opportunity and Human Rights Commission (VEOHRC). This Australian state is one of the few jurisdictions in the world to include physical features as a form of discrimination in its equal opportunities legislation (Hall, 2009). This analysis matters not just because it furthers understanding of forms of employment discrimination but also because it signals limitations in current conceptualisations of gender and interactive service work.

The first part of this article briefly discusses the concepts of emotional and aesthetic labour and the complementary and common features of these two forms of labour in interactive services. This section also considers the issue of lookism. The following section then outlines the physical features ground of discrimination in the Victorian Equal Opportunity Act (1995) and the archival analysis of the enquiries and complaints made to the EOC based on physical features in relation to employment. The findings from this archival research are then presented, disaggregating the analysis by industry, occupation and sex. The findings both confirm and challenge the expectations about lookism in relation to interactive service work and women. Based on the findings, the final section of the article focuses on the issue of gender and the research of interactive service work and how, as service work continues to dominate employment and looks become more important in the workplace and beyond, the issue of lookism is likely to become more prominent.

## **2 Gender, looks and lookism**

In recent years, the body has been an absent presence in sociological accounts of work – it was there but barely recognised – or when it was recognised, cast as a gender issue. In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, when work was dangerous and physically demanding, its impact on the labouring body was often immediate and visible – through physical injuries most obviously. With the relative decline of the primary and secondary sectors – coal mining and steel mill jobs, for example – and the rise in the number of service jobs, the centrality of the body to work became less visible (as did the now hidden, psychological injuries such as stress). Whilst the labouring body continued to toil, it became absented from analyses of work according to Slavishak (2008). When it was raised in analyses of service work, by Adkins (1995) for example, it was as part of wider debates about feminised service and used to explain the propensity for women to occupy interactive service jobs or seen through the lens of sexual harassment, with men's bodies an arbiter and potential and actual threat to women's bodies. This 'point of departure' reflected wider feminist arguments about the oppression of women (Morgan, 2002, p.419) and whilst legitimate, the body in work became a bit-part player on a stage primarily concerned with gender relations.

The absent body and the gendered bodily presence both feature in Hochschild's (1983) articulation of emotional labour, which has dominated research of interactive service work for the past two decades. Through emotional labour, Hochschild describes how, with employees now part of the product, service organisations seek to shape these workers' feelings to affect the desired service encounter. It involves "the management of emotion to create publicly observable facial and bodily display . . . sold for a wage and therefore has exchange value" (1983, p.7). Having the right attitude is regarded as a prerequisite of employees appropriately managing their own and customers' feelings in this service encounter. To this end, feeling rules prescribe how employees are to interact with customers. Employees are required to be courteous, friendly and helpful to customers, for example. Unfortunately, the body work that often accompanies these feeling rules, for example the smile to indicate friendliness, was quickly retired in research on emotional labour. Instead analysis focused on employee attitudes rather than appearance and employer attempts to control and transmute workers' feelings rather than their bodies (see, e.g., Callaghan and Thompson, 2002).

Although recognition of emotional labour marked an important step forward in analysis of interactive service work, the conceptual framing of it was thus limited. More recent research has sought to shift the emphasis onto the corporeality inherent of this type of work. This research centres on an appreciation and analysis of aesthetic labour (Warhurst et al., 2000).

This labour refers to employees' bodies being organisationally produced or 'made up' to embody the organisation with employer expectation that this labour will provide commercial benefit for the organisation. It is defined as:

“ . . . the supply of 'embodied capacities and attributes' possessed by workers at the point of entry into employment. Employers then mobilise, develop and commodify these capacities and attributes through processes of recruitment, selection and training, transforming them into 'competencies' or 'skills' which are then aesthetically geared towards producing a 'style' of service encounter . . . deliberately intended to appeal to the senses of customers.” (p.4)

Thus, interactive service employers seek frontline employees who have or can be made to have a prescribed corporeality, with that corporeality part of the product on offer. Employees are, for example, hired because of the way they look and talk; once employed, they are instructed how to stand whilst working, what to wear and how to wear it and even what to say to customers because such comportment, dress and speech appeal to the visual and aural senses of customers and thereby enhance the service encounter. As such aesthetic labour, as with emotional labour, is way of determining what work is to be undertaken by employees in interactive services and how that work is to be done (Warhurst et al., 2009).

As Witz et al. (2003) note, aesthetic labour complements emotional labour. In referring to display work, Hochschild acknowledged, albeit briefly, the importance of employee corporeality in making manifest the required employee emotions within this interaction; the smile to indicate friendliness. As Hochschild's core definition highlights, emotional labour involves a publicly observable facial and bodily display by employees. Moreover display rules create 'looks' that are a key feature of 'the emotional style of . . . the service' according to Hochschild (p.5). Different looks create different styles of service for companies. Hochschild identifies some of these looks – 'sophisticated' and 'neighbourly' for example – and which represent different 'company personalities' targeting different 'market segments' (p.97). With its focus on the body, aesthetic labour thus foregrounds what is empirically present but analytically marginalised in emotional labour – the body work required of employees and how employers seek to control and transmute workers' corporeality.

Although, analytically, aesthetic labour is a complement to emotional labour, there is also a related argument common to both in some accounts that women are the major, even sole, providers of both types of labour. Hochschild (1983, p.11) points out that women are over-represented in jobs that demand emotional labour because “women more than men have put emotional labour on the market”. She goes further, arguing that that “women are more accomplished managers of feeling” (p.11) because gender is a 'determinant' (p.20) of the skill required to manage feelings and that it is women who better understand this management and 'who specialise in emotional labour' (p.20). For Hochschild, it is women's gendered bodies that are best able to deliver emotional labour and which lead to the gendering of service work. The prevalence of women in jobs requiring emotional labour is thus accompanied by an argument that the skills required to enact a good service encounter are inherently feminine (Gatta et al., 2009). This assumption is also evident in some accounts of aesthetic labour. Examining the same occupation as Hochschild – flight attendants, though in the UK rather than the US – Tyler and Taylor (1998) argue for example that the deployment of aesthetic labour by the female flight attendants is as a 'gift' (p.166) from women to men. It is an 'aesthetic exchange' that is a particular aspect of women's work. As such it is 'somewhat invisible' (Hancock and Tyler, 2000, p.119), concealed behind the idiom of feminine naturalness (see also Pettinger, 2005).

A key difference between aesthetic and emotional labour is that aesthetic labour helps make explicable 'lookism'. This lookism has been suggested as the next battleground of employment discrimination. It is defined by Ayto (1999, p.485) as "prejudice or discrimination on the grounds of appearance (i.e., uglies are done down and beautiful people get all the breaks)". It was first used in print by the *Washington Post* in the late 1970s (Tietje and Cresap, 2005) but more recently in the UK legal experts have explicitly aligned it with aesthetic labour (Middlemiss, 2004). This latter work recognises lookism as an issue within employment – an issue pithily summarised by Oaff (2003, p.7): "If your gender and your race haven't kept you off the short list, your physical appearance still might".

The salience of 'looks' within aesthetic labour occurs because sight is the dominant sense in western society, with the Enlightenment establishing the 'reign of the eye' (Jütte quoted in Smith, 2007, p.14) creating a primarily (but not exclusively) visual understanding of behaviour. Therefore, not surprisingly, despite potentially enveloping the full range of senses, it is employee looks that primarily underpin the aesthetic labour demands of employers (though, of course, other sensory affects are recognised such as worker speech). Resonating with wider debates about whether aesthetics are concerned with beauty or simply with what affects the senses (Williams, p.1990), these looks can be perceived 'good looks' or the desired 'right look' with different organisations seeking different looks as part of their market positioning (Pettinger, 2004). Employers want these employee looks either as part of the corporate image and branding strategies, or more basely, because they are perceived to be attractive to customers and therefore likely to generate new or repeat custom. Ultimately, the use of employee looks is a strategy by employers to secure competitive advantage in what can be highly crowded high streets as economies become service dominated, with more retailers and restaurants, for example, jostling to attract the attention of customers. Firms such as Virgin Airlines and Australia Post in Australia and a number of hospitality and retail firms in the UK, for example, have been identified as particularly promoting the appearance of their workers both in recruitment and in advertising materials (see, e.g., ABC, 2006; Devine, 2004; Nickson et al., 2005; Spiess and Waring, 2005).

What constitutes these looks is socially constructed. Jones (2010) has noted that from the nineteenth century, the beauty industry, then supported from the early twentieth century by the embryonic movie, press and advertising industries, promoted a beauty ideal based on, crudely, 'young, white, blonde and thin' bodies (p.334). Although variations and hence different looks, were permissible and even later promoted as beauty companies globalised, these are still variations on a theme – for example, the encouragement of Asian and Afro-American female consumers to aspire to white, Western-like facial and bodily features. Jones is ambivalent about the outcomes. On the one hand, he admits that the beauty industry pushes 'warped aspirational values' (p.314) enslaving consumers to the need to conform to these socially constructed appearance expectations. On the other hand, through consumption, he believes that the industry is part of the modernisation project, empowering consumers by promoting individual agency and autonomy and ultimately offering a 'beauty premium' for those who buy into the 'beauty myth'.

Certainly being perceived to have the right look or good looks can be financially beneficial for employees. Longitudinal research indicates that a beauty premium operates in the labour market. As Rhode (2010) notes, employer perceptions of employee appearance can influence judgements about job performance and work competence and, consequently, income, status and prospects. Adamitis (2000, p.195) notes how "society considers an attractive appearance to be a highly valued commodity. Indeed, good looks may translate into a better education,

better job, bigger income and generally a happy life". A number of studies have linked perceived physical attractiveness to higher pay and better job prospects. In the UK, Harper (2000) surveyed 11,000 33-year-old employees and discovered that unattractive men were paid 15% less and unattractive women 11% less, creating a 'penalty for plainness'. Hamermesh and Biddle (1994), drawing on household survey data for over 10,000 Americans and Canadians, found similar results.

Beyond the general support for the existence of either a penalty or a premium depending on levels of attractiveness, Harper and Hamermesh and Biddle also found evidence of occupation-specific effects in terms of how "the labour market sorts the best-looking people into occupations where their looks are productive" (Hamermesh and Biddle p.1192). As Hatfield and Sprecher (1986, p.55) note:

"Hiring on the basis of looks may be especially pervasive when a job requires employees to deal with the public. The employer may know there is no real difference in competence between an attractive and an unattractive employee, but there may be a difference in how they are perceived by the public or the client that could mean a difference in profit."

Looks therefore matter to potential and actual employees because they contribute to hiring decisions, performance evaluation, pay and career development. For some commentators, this emphasis on looks is unproblematic. Postrel (2003, p.130), for example, claims that physical features should be a legitimate criterion of employment. Making claims of an emergent 'aesthetic economy', she asks: "If a charming or intelligent person can have an edge in the job market, why not a handsome or stylish one?" She argues that those workers who are not handsome or stylish and who might therefore be excluded such opportunities are free 'to vote with their feet' and choose jobs elsewhere in the labour market.

The possibility that employer emphasis on employee appearance can have discriminatory implications and detrimental outcomes are side stepped by Postrel but arise, Tietje and Cresap (2005, p.32) argue because "in our society aesthetic capital, like other kinds of capital, is unequally distributed". Significantly, discrimination on the basis of physical features, whilst seemingly widespread, is not a prohibited form of discrimination in the vast majority of countries (Rhode, 2010). The Australian state of Victoria, however, has legislated against discrimination on the grounds of an individual's physical appearance. The VEOHRC also has an archive of cases in which employees have made enquiries and complaints about this discrimination. It is these data that are used to analyse the issue of lookism in employment and explore the issues raised in the discussion about emotional and aesthetic labour, particularly the claim that lookism might be expected to occur primarily in services and centre on female workers. In part, the findings from the VEOHRC archive confirm this expectation, but they also challenge it and raise new questions about gender and interactive service work.

### **3 The Victorian Equal Opportunity Act (1995) and the research design**

Unlike other Australian states or the Commonwealth, the state of Victoria formally prohibits discrimination on the basis of employee physical features. Under the Victorian Equal Opportunity Act (1995), it is unlawful to treat someone unfairly or discriminate against them because of their physical features.

Equal opportunities legislation in Victoria in the mid-1970s prohibited discrimination on the basis of various characteristics including sex and marital status. In subsequent years, other attributes including impairment, sexual harassment, race, religious and political

belief, parental status and sexual preference were added. In 1995, the Act was updated and broadened to include, amongst other attributes, the category of physical features as various complaints concerning discrimination on the basis of body size and length and colour of hair received by the Commission did not fit easily within the disability/impairment categories. The Act now specifically refers to discrimination on the basis of physical features and seeks to prevent employers from treating people less favourably because of these features. The Act defines physical features as “height, weight, size or other bodily characteristics including attributes such as hair length or colour” (EOC, 2003, n.p.). These physical features can include both primary, immutable attributes inherent to the person’s ‘natural appearance’, as well as secondary or mutable attributes – characteristics over which the person has, in some sense, or at some time, had some control or chosen. The EOC guidelines state, for example that “it is against the law to discriminate against an employee... because of their dress or appearance”. Nonetheless, it is recognised that the employer may lawfully require that staff dress in an appropriate manner and such decisions are left to management, recognising that dress codes and appearance can vary depending on organisational market positioning. VEOHRC guidelines state that:

“an employer can create and maintain an image for their organisation that best suits their industry and their clients’ needs by setting reasonable standards of dress, appearance and behaviour.” (EOC, n.d)

Thus, employers may set and enforce standards of dress and appearance that are ‘reasonable’ for the occupation and industry concerned. Thus, different standards apply to employees working in a bank compared to a construction site or the degree of customer contact required to be made by the employee as part of the job. However, the Act recognises that enforcing particular dress codes and appearance can have discriminatory implications in relation to sex, religion, race, disability age, pregnancy and lawful sexual activity. As a consequence, the VEOHRC provides employer guidelines on appropriate standards. These guidelines state that it is illegal to discriminate against employees by treating them less favourably than someone else because of their dress or physical features in relation to hiring, firing promotion, pay and training and covering full-time, part-time, casual, probationary and contract workers.

To date that there has been no assessment of the operation or impact of the Victorian Act’s physical features provision. To conduct a preliminary assessment, all cases brought to the Commission from 1995 to 2005 were reviewed and those enquiries and complaints that included a claim of ‘physical features’ discrimination were identified. In addition, contextual data was gathered through two interviews with VEOHRC case managers. The research team was granted access to the VEOHRC archives in Victoria and necessarily worked on-site in the VEOHRC offices examining the individual case files. All of these cases centre on employment, with the data covering all industries and occupations. This article presents preliminary findings of employment discrimination on the basis of physical features and identifies types and patterns of enquiries and complaints amongst the archived cases of the VEOHRC. Due to their obligations under the Public Records Act 1973 (Vic), the VEOHRC destroys case files after seven years. As such, the detailed analysis was only possible for cases occurring after 1998–1999. To address the expectations outlined in the previous section, analysis of the data focused on a number of issues:

- the number of employee physical features cases (enquiries and complaints) each year filed under the Equal Opportunity Act 1995

- the percentage of these cases in relation to the total number of employment cases received by the VEOHRC
- the percentage of employment related cases in relation to the total number of cases received by the VEOHRC in relation to other services covered by the Act
- identification of the industries and occupations from which the employment-related cases arose
- the disaggregation of complaints by sex for industries and occupations.

The usual anonymity and confidentiality are applied to the case analysis, similarly to the interviews conducted with case managers and officers. However, beyond this usual research ethics requirement, there is a legal necessity for the VEOHRC to ensure absolute client confidentiality and anonymity. As a consequence, the findings section can only present occupational or industry identifiers for the cases; details of individual cases cannot be revealed. It should also be noted that the analysis only encompasses enquiries and complaints to the VEOHRC. Under the Act, the major function of the VEOHRC is to receive and investigate complaints. It has investigative and conciliation powers only; it is unable to make binding judicial determinations. In circumstances where conciliation fails or where the complainant so elects, matters can be referred by the complainant to the Victorian Civil and Administrative Tribunal (VCAT). Unfortunately, the files for referred cases held by the VEOHRC do not record the decisions of the VCAT (for a discussion of these limitations, see Hall, 2009).

## **4 Findings**

This section starts with an overview of the case statistics. The findings are then divided into a number of sub-sections that present: the number of enquiries and complaints; the patterning of cases by industry and occupation; the sex differences within the cases by occupation and industry. Finally, a sub-section drills down into emergent issues from the cases.

### *4.1 The number of enquiries and complaints*

Each year the VEOHRC receives thousands of enquiries about a number of attributes suggesting possible discrimination related to age, sex, race or political belief for example. Physical features is one such attribute. Table 1 below shows the number of enquiries received each year about physical features. These enquiries are analysed as a percentage of the total number of enquiries across all attributes and the relative ranking of enquiries about physical features in relation to enquiries about all attributes.

Table 1 reveals that 1876 enquires were made to 2005 about possible discrimination related to physical features since the Act was created in 1995. The percentage figures for physical features seem low but it should be noted that in the first year of operation of the Act, the top-ranked attribute by enquiry was in disability at 12.1%. Over the 10 years of the Act, physical features represent on average the 10th attribute initiating enquiries from employees reporting to the VEOHRC. For the first four years, physical features ranked around 13 out of just over 20 attributes; however, it has become more significant rising from ninth at the turn of the century to seventh at the time of the analysis. The top-ranked attribute by enquiry for 2005 was again disability at 16.7% of the total; sex and age both represented less than 5%; physical features 2%. Enquires about physical features are, therefore, significant relative

to other possible discriminatory attributes covered by the Act and its relative salience is increasing.

**Table 1** Enquiries about physical features made in person, by telephone or in writing

| <i>Year</i>   | <i>Number of enquires about physical features</i> | <i>% of all enquiries</i> | <i>Rank amongst all enquiries</i> |
|---------------|---|---------------------------|-----------------------------------|
| 1995–1996     | 93  | 0.5                       | 13                                |
| 1996–1997     | 183   | 1                         | 11                                |
| 1997–1998     | 148   | 0.9                       | 10                                |
| 1998–1999     | 136   | 1                         | 13                                |
| 1999–2000     | 234   | 1.7                       | 9                                 |
| 2000–2001     | 244   | 1.8                       | 9                                 |
| 2001–2002     | 269   | 2                         | 9                                 |
| 2002–2003     | 219   | 2                         | 9                                 |
| 2003–2004     | 169   | 2                         | 9                                 |
| 2004–2005     | 181   | 2                         | 7                                 |
| Total/Average | 1876  | 1.49                      | 10                                |

Percentages rounded.

Only some initial enquiries are subsequently lodged as formal complaints with the VEOHRC. For example, some enquiries are classified by the VEOHRC as being not discriminatory or not related to ‘physical features’. However, an information gap remains about the large attrition rate between enquiry and complaint and this gap in information merits further research beyond the scope of this article. Although there is no way of assessing the willingness of the public to raise a complaint with the VEOHRC from this research, it is a reasonable assumption that callers initiate an enquiry with the VEOHRC to seek advice about possible discrimination. At the time of the research, there was still only limited public awareness of the physical features aspect of the legislation according to the VEOHRC interviewees. As the VEOHRC staff noted, with limited public awareness, it is often not until a claimant contacts the VEOHRC that they become aware of the physical features category and the option of pursuing a complaint under it. Although the VEOHRC cannot suggest a course of action when potential claimants make enquiries, they do outline the options open to claimants and may advise that their claim may fall into the category of the physical features attribute, as well as more commonly known categories of discrimination based on ethnicity, sex or religion. The raising of these options may explain the high levels of attrition that occur between enquiries about physical features discrimination and the formal lodging of complaints, and in many of the cases researched the claimants relied on the physical features category in combination with other forms of discrimination.

As with other attributes, complaints related to physical features can be made in a number of areas encompassing, for example, accommodation, education, goods and services, sport etc. The total number of such complaints in all areas is shown in the right-hand column of Table 2. The research reported here examines only the area of employment, which is by far the largest area in which all types of complaints are received – usually around three-quarters of all complaints. As indicated below, of the 1876 enquiries and 800 subsequent complaints related to physical features, 639 were complaints in the area of employment<sup>1</sup>. The table reveals that in its first year of operation, few complaints were registered although since that time complaints have increased and then stabilised in the latter half of the period.

**Table 2** Complaints related to physical features in all areas and the area of employment

| <i>Year</i> | <i>Employment physical features cases</i> |          |              | <i>Total number of physical features cases in all areas</i> |
|-------------|---|----------|--------------|---|
|             | <i>F</i>                                  | <i>M</i> | <i>Total</i> |   |
| 1995–1996   | 11  | 4        | 15           | 20  |
| 1996–1997   | 22  | 13       | 35           | 36  |
| 1997–1998   | 21  | 4        | 25           | 32  |
| 1998–1999   | 43  | 13       | 56           | 74  |
| 1999–2000   | 81  | 26       | 107          | 128   |
| 2000–2001   | 42  | 28       | 70           | 104   |
| 2001–2002   | 82  | 33       | 115          | 131   |
| 2002–2003   | 42  | 23       | 65           | 81  |
| 2003–2004   | 38  | 25       | 63           | 76  |
| 2004–2005   | 53  | 35       | 88           | 118   |
| Total       | 435                                       | 204      | 639          | 800   |

Table 2 also reveals that complaints from female employees dominate although there are a significant number of complaints registered by male employees each year. There are fluctuations over the 10 years but the trend to 2005 indicates a narrowing of the gap between female and male complaints about employment discrimination on the basis of physical features: for the year 2004–2005, complaints were 60:40 in terms of the female–male split. Thus, a sizeable number of complaints come from male workers and, relative to those from women, the proportion of complaints from men is rising.

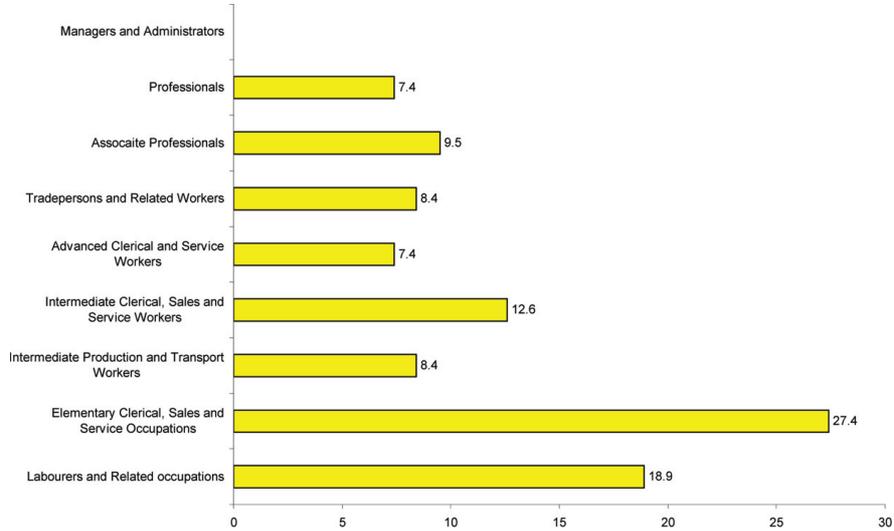
#### 4.2 *Pattern of cases by industry and occupation*

With the VEOHRC destroying some case files under its seven-year rule, detailed analysis was undertaken of 106 individual cases from 2000 to 2005. All cases analysed were classified by the VEOHRC under the physical features component of the legislation and relate to employment. It should be noted that the details included in each case file were often brief.

Of the 106 cases, it was possible to identify the sex of the claimant in 89% of cases. Of these cases, 62% were female. Using the Australian Standard Classification of Occupations (ASCO),<sup>2</sup> it was possible to identify the occupational group of the claimant in 90% of cases. Only one occupational group, Managers and Administrators, reported no physical features cases. Of the remaining groups, when analysing all cases in which an occupation was reported, three occupations (Elementary Clerical, Sales and Service; Intermediate Clerical, Sales and Service; and Labourers and Related) were particularly prevalent as Figure 1 shows. As expected, therefore, complaints were prevalent amongst service workers. Surprisingly, they also feature strongly amongst labouring and related occupations.

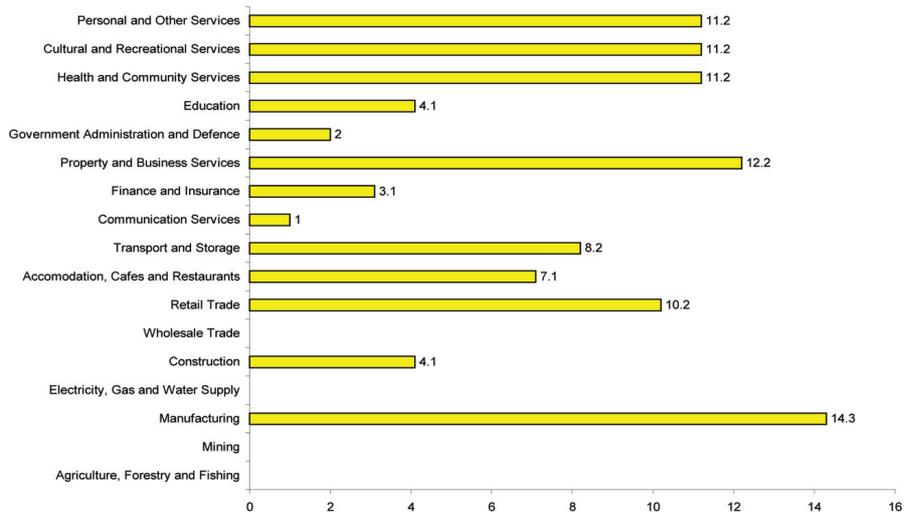
Analysis of industries – as defined by the Australian and New Zealand Standard Industrial Classification (ANZSIC)<sup>3</sup> – was also conducted, with 92.5% of total cases being classifiable by industry (see Figure 2). As Figure 2 reveals, there was at least one case in 13 out of the 17 industries, with no reported cases in the four industries of Agriculture, Mining, Electricity Gas and Water Supply or Wholesale Trade. Examining all industries that had 10 or more cases, those with most cases were Manufacturing; Property and Business Services; Health and Community Services; Cultural and Recreational Services; Personal/Other Services; and Retail. Cases were prevalent, therefore, in service industries, but the worst performing

**Figure 1** Total physical features cases by occupational group (%) (see online version for colours)



Base  $n = 95$ .

**Figure 2** Total physical features cases by industry (%) (see online version for colours)



Base  $n = 98$ .

industry overall was manufacturing, with some particular service industries not far behind. Surprisingly, the hospitality industry (Accommodation, Cafes and Restaurants) accounted for only 7.1% of all cases.

#### 4.3 Sex differences within/between occupations and industries

With files destroyed after seven years and incomplete data in some remaining cases, there are limitations to the data analysis. The available data reveals sex differences within each

occupational group. When examining all groups, the chi-square value was insignificant but this lack of significance was likely to be a result of the very small expected and observed cell counts.<sup>4</sup> These small counts were further exacerbated by the fact that 23 cases provided either no information on gender and/or occupation so that nearly 22% of cases were excluded from the analysis. When examining the Elementary Clerical, Sales and Service and Labourer and Related Occupational categories, both had high cell counts for males and females.<sup>5</sup> Significant differences were thus apparent in these groups. The full breakdown of cases is given in Table 3.

**Table 3** Number of cases in each ASCO code cross tabulated by sex

| <i>Occupation</i>                                  | <i>Male</i> | <i>Female</i> |
|--|-------------|---------------|
| Managers and administrators                        | –           | –             |
| Professionals                                      | 2           | 3             |
| Associate professionals                            | 4           | 4             |
| Tradespersons and related workers                  | 2           | 3             |
| Advanced clerical and service workers              | 1           | 4             |
| Intermediate clerical, sales and service workers   | 1           | 10            |
| Intermediate production and transport workers      | 4           | 3             |
| Elementary clerical, sales and service occupations | 6           | 18            |
| Labourers and related occupations                  | 11          | 7             |

Base  $n = 83$  (all reporting both sex and occupation).

As Table 3 reveals, few differences existed for all but three occupational types. Females were more likely to have reported discrimination on the basis of physical features in routine interactive service occupations, specifically both Intermediate and Elementary Clerical, Sales and Customer Service occupations, whereas males were more likely to do so in Labourer and Related occupations.<sup>6</sup>

Differences were also apparent when examining sex differences by industry. In examining these differences for all industries, the chi-square result was significant, although the number of industries meant that 75% of all cells had expected cell counts below an acceptable level. Given the high number of industries and the relatively small number of overall cases, this outcome is not unexpected. The small number of cases was further exacerbated by the fact that 20 cases contained either no industry or sex information and were thus excluded from the analysis. There was no single industry in which both the male and the female counts were over the chi-square threshold for acceptability (although the manufacturing industry was only just below the threshold), thus results should be interpreted with caution. Given the number of cases available for analysis, this issue was unavoidable. Table 4 shows the industry/sex pattern.

As Table 4 shows, men were more likely to claim discrimination on the basis of physical features in the secondary sector – Manufacturing; Transport and Storage; Construction – but also some tertiary – Personal and Other Services for example. Women were more likely to claim discrimination across the range of most industries although claims in service industries were more pronounced. Those industries with the biggest differences between men and women were the Cultural and Recreational Services, Health and Community Services, Property and Business Services, Retail and Personal and Other Services. It thus appears that women are on the whole more likely than men to report discrimination on the basis of physical features in service industries, with men more likely to report discrimination

on the basis of physical features in secondary industries. However, there are male claimants in services.

**Table 4** Number of cases in each ANZSIC code cross tabulated by sex

| <i>Industry</i>                       | <i>Male</i> | <i>Female</i> |
|---------------------------------------|-------------|---------------|
| Agriculture, forestry and fishing     | –           | –             |
| Mining                                | –           | –             |
| Manufacturing                         | 8           | 6             |
| Electricity, gas and water supply     | –           | –             |
| Construction                          | 3           | 0             |
| Wholesale trade                       | –           | –             |
| Retail trade                          | 2           | 7             |
| Accommodation, cafes and restaurants  | 1           | 4             |
| Transport and storage                 | 5           | 2             |
| Communication services                | 0           | 1             |
| Finance and insurance                 | 1           | 0             |
| Property and business services        | 3           | 7             |
| Government administration and defence | 0           | 2             |
| Education                             | 0           | 3             |
| Health and community services         | 1           | 8             |
| Cultural and recreational services    | 2           | 9             |
| Personal and other services           | 4           | 7             |

Base  $n = 86$  (all reporting sex and industry).

These findings reflect the wider gender profile across specific industries and occupations. For example, as in many other countries, Australian women are over-represented in occupations such as clerical and administrative workers, community and personal service workers and sales workers. They are under-represented in other occupations such as machinery operators and drivers, technicians and trades workers and also managers. Industry breakdown is also segmented, with women more concentrated in the three industries of healthcare and social assistance, education and training, and retail which together comprise 44.4% of female employment in Australia. Likewise men dominate construction and manufacturing, with women over-represented in healthcare and social assistance and education and training and under-represented in construction and manufacturing (ABS, 2010).

Unsurprisingly, female complainants are more common in feminised industries and male complainants are more common in masculinised industries. Nevertheless, there are still complaints from employees in the under-represented sex category in many relatively highly sex-segregated industries, although these complaints occur more often for women in masculinised industries (e.g. manufacturing) than for men in feminised industries (e.g. health and community services).

## 5 Discussion and concluding remarks

Aesthetic labour is both a useful complement and extension to emotional labour (Witz et al., 2003). If emotional labour foregrounds worker feelings, aesthetic labour highlights worker corporeality. In its recuperation of the body in interactive service work, aesthetic labour

helps explain lookism, or employment discrimination based on that corporeality. Research into both emotional and aesthetic labours in interactive services also shares an argument about the propensity of female workers to provide this labour; Hochschild (1983), for example, argued that female workers are the more 'natural' providers of emotional labour and Tyler and Taylor (1998) and (Hancock and Tyler, 2000) argue that aesthetic labour too is concerned with feminised performativity. As such lookism might be expected to centre on female workers in interactive services.

Analysis of the VEOHRC archives confirms that claims of lookism were made mainly by female workers in interactive services, the latter broadly classified. However, there are two other important findings that act as caveats. The first is that claims of lookism were also made by male workers in services. Thus, both men and women make claims of employment discrimination on the basis of their physical appearance in services. These claims would suggest that some workers perceive themselves as neither enslaved nor empowered, as Jones (2010) posits, but simply victims of lookism.

The findings raise questions about our current understanding of the gendering of interactive services, particularly the claimed sex determinism underpinning the capacity to undertake efficacious service work. One explanation for aesthetic labour also involving men might be that interactive service work is now being increasingly undertaken by men, particularly male students needing to support their studies with paid employment (Canny, 2002). Research on aesthetic labour in the UK by Walls (2008) reveals that the importance of employee 'styling' also applies to men in interactive service. The men in his study of fashion retailers would use their aesthetic attributes in seeking employment and male workers had to offer "'cool", "style" and "trendiness"' (p.110) once in work. In her research of the hospitality industry Boyle (2007) also notes how employers direct well-groomed male workers to serve female customers and direct female workers to attend to male customers. It was 'part of the job' for both groups of workers and intended by employers to boost custom. Recognition that male employee appearance is also regulated and disciplined is not to say that interactive service work is not gendered, merely that analysis to date has been conceptually limited in its assumptions about that gendering. With more male employees in interactive service work, both men and women are expected to manage their appearance – and presumably their feelings too (cf. Callaghan and Thompson, 2002).

Future research might usefully analyse the extent of and reasons for, aesthetic and emotional labour demands on male workers and how these demands reflect historical circumstances (cf. Adkins, 1995; Hochschild, 1983) In this respect the emotional labour paradigm erroneously perceived it as a 'specialism' particular to women because it conflated female prevalence with female naturalness – as exemplified most obviously by the flight attendants of Hochschild's study.

Indication of this unhelpful conflation occurs with new analysis of historical material from interactive services. This material indicates that men were also once expected to provide what is now termed emotional labour when they were the dominant sex employed in these jobs. For example, in early twentieth century Scottish banking, McKinlay (2009) has uncovered a struggle over the employer's right to control the workplace behaviour of clerks. Not only was male bank clerks' 'penmanship' assessed but also their attitudes to other staff and customers. McKinlay cites one inter-war industry commentary: "we occasionally find men at the counter who are remarkable neither for their courtesy nor their efficiency, whose only strong points are an overwhelming sense of their own importance" (p.4). Echoing Hochschild's point that different forms of employee engagement with customers provide

different styles of service that help brand organisations, another commentary instructs bank clerks that in exchanges with customers “there is a wide range between the rough-and-ready at one end of the scale and the stiff and stilted at the other; and the middle territory of cordiality tempered by due reserve would be your best choice” (p.4). Interestingly staff appraisals also noted the comportment and dress of clerks. Similarly in Australia in the nineteenth century, male banking staff were recruited and promoted on their ability to be numerate; however, their aesthetic attributes were also assessed (van den Broek, 2011). These studies indicate that emotional (and aesthetic) labour existed for men in interactive services before these jobs, such as those in banking, were feminised. To return to Hochschild’s flight attendants, it is often forgotten that in the early days of commercial aviation attendants were male (Mills, 2006). It was only in the 1930s that airlines began to slowly introduce female flight attendants. There is no analysis of whether employers demanded what is now termed emotional labour of male flight attendants during these early years of commercial aviation. However given the recent archival research of it in other interactive service work it is plausible that such demands did exist of male workers at that time. In disentangling the conflation of propensity and naturalness it would be helpful therefore for if future research on emotional and aesthetic labour is less ahistorical in its analyses.

One outcome of the (re-)masculinisation of interactive service work is that males may now fall under an objectifying gaze. Nearly 40 years ago, Mulvey (1975) argued that a ‘male gaze’ exists by which males gain power through the possession of a gaze that heterosexually objectifies women. In Adkins’ (1995) research of the hospitality industry, it is clear that female employees were objectified by male customers. Boyle’s (2007) more recent research of the same industry suggests that, with the commodification of male employee looks, employers are now intentionally seeking to objectify male workers through a female customer gaze. Again this opportunity (for employers) arises as more males work in interactive services now than at the time of Adkins’ (or Hochschild’s) research. Thus, even as a female hyper-sexualisation is occurring (Walter, 2010), men too are becoming sexualised to boost business. Although aesthetic labour is not itself sexualised labour, when employee corporeality is deliberately sexualised as an organisational strategy to create a particular look based on sexual allure, then that sexualisation can be understood through the lens of aesthetic labour (Warhurst and Nickson, 2009).

The second additional finding is that the VEOHRC archive revealed a significant number of cases involving male and, to some extent, female workers in industries other than services, for example, manufacturing and transport and storage. This finding might seem surprising given these workers typically lack interaction with customers. However, research on the beauty premium, for example, Harper (2000), reveals that although the premium is more salient in services, it also exists to a lesser extent in other industries such as manufacturing. Confirmation from the VEOHRC archives of lookism in non-service industries suggests that although aesthetic labour makes lookism in interactive services understandable – that is, employers hire and deploy employees for their perceived looks in the anticipation that these looks will appeal favourably to customers – the emphasis placed on employee looks by employers extends beyond interactive services.

This finding indicates that whilst aesthetic labour is a useful concept for understanding the importance placed upon workers’ corporeality within interactive services, the emphasis on physical appearance is attaining greater purchase more widely in the economy and society (Postrel, 2003; Rhode, 2010). Echoing the possibility of multiple gazes, in the putative aesthetic economy Postrel claims that we are all now ‘subject to the critical eye of others’

(p.72), noting for example how politicians are overtly concerned with their appearance. Mary Spillane's Colour Me Beautiful image-consulting organisation openly advertises its services to British politicians (both male and female) (Spillane, 2000). Clothes, hair and body language are deemed important for and by politicians and these politicians, with the aid of advisers, seek to mobilise, develop and deploy this aesthetic armoury to win the favour of political consumers – voters (and journalists). Again, however, whilst both male and female politicians' appearance is examined by these consumers, it still tends to be female politicians most subject to it.

However, it is not just politicians who have makeovers. Society has become 'transfixed by the pursuit of physical excellence' according to Overell (2006, p.14). Cosmetic interventions, surgical or otherwise, are becoming more common both for women and men. There has been "an explosion of activity designed to produce better looking, or more aesthetically pleasing people" states Postrel (p.27). The beauty industry has expanded massively during the twentieth century (Jones, 2010), including cosmetic surgery (or as it is now sometimes called, 'aesthetic surgery'). Now, Elliott (2008, p.34) states, "nothing is sexier than surgery. From Botox and lipo to tummy tuck and mini-facelifts, cosmetic surgery is today a massive global business". He notes how the industry is worth more than \$20bn in the US. Similarly in the UK, the beauty industry has expanded rapidly over 2003–2007, with annual growth rates ranging from 22% to 69% (Key Note, 2008).

Significantly again, appearance now matters to men and women. Within the UK, Peter Baker, chief executive of the Men's Health Forum, recognises that men are increasingly pressurised to look good, a process that has been exacerbated with images of men with six pack stomachs and toned bodies now commonplace in the print and visual media (BBC, 2007). Within the workplace context the shift from often dirty, grimy and hard physical labour to service work, be it routine interactive service or professional service work, has increasingly led to expectations that men need to look good within the workplace. In this aspect, another consequence of the research findings in this article is that future research needs to shift away from focusing only on men who are seeking bodily enhancement as a feature of leisure and consumptive identity (cf. Fraser and Greco, 2007) to the study of masculinity and bodywork on appearance for work.

The rise in importance of the beauty industry and cosmetic surgery seems to reflect the increasing recognition of the relationship between employee looks and self-esteem, particularly in the workplace, with Westwood (2004, p.7) arguing that:

"How we look and how we and others, think we look – appear to matter a great deal and this is an important component of our self-esteem. Women may be no more obsessed about the way they look than men. In this sense the increased value placed on appearance is becoming a more gender-neutral phenomenon, aided by an evolving economy more dependent on personal and 'high touch' services."

Any work-related challenge to this self-esteem is therefore likely to be increasingly problematic to employees, as the rise in enquires to the VEOHRC suggests. If current trends continue – both the expansion of services and the emphasis placed on employee looks more generally – it would not be surprising if more enquiries from both women and men were made to the VEOHRC and that, even if knowledge of the law's existence is currently weak, the need for legislation to address lookism in Victoria and elsewhere will grow. Indeed, there are discussions within Australia about extending the Victorian initiative to other states (Lund, 2011). Debate about such an extension is understandable in the context of the

VEOHRC research findings that the looks of men and women in interactive services are the subject of employer attention and that looks of both men and women matter in jobs beyond interactive services.

The debate in Australia indicates that the body at work is increasingly an important policy issue. Its absent presence in sociological accounts of work is also changing. The findings from the VEOHRC research suggests that new analysis is needed that takes account of the range of jobs in which looks matter and matter for male and female workers, particularly if a new battlefield in employment discrimination does open up.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup>The total number of physical features cases in all areas covered by the Act, including employment, was 800. The total number of all cases in which physical features featured in combination with other attributes such as sex or race was 1421. Those cases involving multiple grounds of alleged discrimination are not included here as they were classified first by those other attributes.

<sup>2</sup>Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) (1993) *Australian Standard Classification of Occupations: Second Edition*, ABS, Canberra.

<sup>3</sup>Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) (1993) *Australian and New Zealand Standard Industrial Classification 1993*, <http://www.abs.gov.au/Ausstats/abs@.nsf/Previousproducts/1292.0Contents11993?opendocument&tabname=Summary&prodno=1292.0&issue=1993&num=&view> (Accessed 27 June 2007).

<sup>4</sup>Chi square value was 12.054 ( $p = 0.099$ ) with 63% of cells in the table falling below the acceptable number of 5 expected cases. Given the fact that the chi square value was relatively high but the analysis was still insignificant the low cell count appears the best explanation for the insignificant results.

<sup>5</sup>Chi square value for these two groups was 5.567 ( $p = 0.018$ ) with no cells with an expected count <5.

<sup>6</sup>The findings for the Intermediate Clerical, Sales and Service group should be interpreted with some caution due to the low expected cell count for males. When examining all trades below Advanced Clerical and Service Occupations this analysis was significant (chi square value 10.094 ( $p = 0.012$ )) although there were low cell counts for both Intermediate Clerical, Sales and Service Occupations and Intermediate Production and Transport Workers (total cells with expected count <5 = 37.5%). The bottom two occupations are therefore the most robust statistically.