

June 7, 2007

ECONOMIC SCENE

## Despite the Dumb Jokes, Stereotypes May Reflect Some Smart Choices

By ROBERT H. FRANK

A quick Web search identifies thousands of jokes about dumb blondes, this one among them: A married couple were awakened by a call at 2 a.m. The wife, a blonde, picked up the phone, listened a moment and said, "How should I know, that's 200 miles from here!" and hung up. Her husband asked, "Who was that?" She replied, "I don't know; some woman wanting to know if the coast is clear."

There are almost as many jokes poking fun at the supposed mental deficiencies of athletes. Two offensive linemen in a rented boat catch an unusually large number of trout in a secluded cove. As they start back to the marina, one reaches over with his felt-tip pen and marks an X on the starboard bow. "I want to make sure we can find this spot again tomorrow," he explained. "Idiot," his friend replied, "what makes you think we'll get the same boat?"

Since there is no persuasive evidence that blondes and athletes are less intelligent than others, such jokes pose a puzzle. Where do the underlying stereotypes come from? Definitive answers remain elusive, but an armchair economic analysis suggests some intriguing possibilities.

Let's begin with the dumb blonde stereotype, which proves especially puzzling in light of what economists know about the dynamics of the informal market for marriage partners. Notwithstanding minor cultural differences, there is broad agreement on the characteristics that define an attractive partner. Most people, for example, prefer partners who are kind, honest, loyal, healthy, intelligent and physically attractive. And in Western countries, at least, blondness is viewed as a positive characteristic in women. The [upshot](#), according to a recent paper by two sociologists, Satoshi Kanazawa of the London School of Economics and Jody L. Kovar of Indiana University of Pennsylvania, is that blondes should actually be more intelligent, on average, than others.

Their claim follows from four plausible propositions. The first two concern differences in the weights used by men and women when evaluating the desirability of potential partners: (1) men generally place greater emphasis on looks; (2) women generally place greater emphasis on income and status. The point is not that men don't care about a woman's income or status, or that women don't care about a man's appearance. Rather, it is that the relative strengths of these concerns differ for men and women. The authors cite extensive evidence in support of both claims.

Their third and fourth propositions also appear to be solid: (3) more-intelligent men tend to achieve higher income and status; (4) both intelligence and physical attractiveness are traits with significant inheritable components. If the first three propositions are true, it follows logically that relatively attractive women will pair up disproportionately with relatively intelligent men. And if both beauty and intelligence are inheritable, then the offspring of such unions will tend to display above-average values of both traits.

In short, the hypothesis that beauty and brains go together does not appear far-fetched. (No one ever claimed life is fair.) By similar reasoning, if gentlemen prefer blondes, fair-haired women should pair more often with intelligent, more successful men, and since hair color is at least weakly inheritable, a positive correlation should also emerge between blondness and intelligence.

What, then, accounts for the pervasiveness of dumb blonde jokes? The logic that governs decisions about investment in education and training suggests a possible answer. How intelligent you appear to others depends not only on your native mental abilities, but also on the extent to which you cultivate them through investment in education and training. In turn, the extent to which a person pursues such investments in “human capital” depends on how their returns compare with those for alternative investments.

If blondes are perceived as more attractive, then being blond may create valuable opportunities that do not require onerous investments in education and training. The dumb blonde stereotype may thus stem from the fact that blondes rationally choose to invest less than others in education and other forms of human capital.

This interpretation is consistent with research documenting a positive link between earnings and physical attractiveness. In [a 1993 paper](#), for example, two economists, Daniel Hamermesh of the [University of Texas](#) and Jeff E. Biddle of [Michigan State University](#), reported that people described as good-looking earned more than 10 percent more than those described as plain. The authors also found that plain women were more likely to marry men with limited education.

The human capital story suggests a similar rationale for the dumb athlete stereotype. Contrary to popular impressions, intelligence and athletic ability may be slightly positively correlated in the population as a whole. (The link shouldn't be surprising. It is the brain, after all, that controls the body.) But because gifted athletes enjoy many attractive social and employment opportunities that others do not, they may rationally choose to invest less, on average, in human capital.

The dumb athlete stereotype is further reinforced by the fact that varsity athletes at any given university are actually less intelligent than their classmates, since many were admitted primarily on the strength of their athletic skills, not because of their academic achievements. If each university admitted people whose last name begins with the letter “M” with SAT scores 400 points lower than those of other applicants, the false impression would quickly form that people with names like Martin and McDermott were mentally deficient. It is the same with athletes.

The bottom line is that popular perceptions about the intelligence of blondes and athletes may stem more from the academic choices made by members of these groups and from choices that others make about them than from any innate differences in mental ability.

Or perhaps jealous brunettes and nonathletes with time on their hands simply sit around making up jokes about their rivals.

*Robert H. Frank is an economist at the Johnson School of Management at Cornell University. His most recent book, “The Economic Naturalist,” was published last month. Contact: [robert-h-frank.com](http://robert-h-frank.com).*

