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## Appearance-based discrimination at workplace: a case study in Estonia : International Rainbow Conference 8.-9.2.2022

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2022-02-08

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Lämsä , A-M , Ojasoo , M , Jyrkinen , M & Pucetaite , R 2022 , ' Appearance-based discrimination at workplace: a case study in Estonia : International Rainbow Conference 8.-9.2.2022 ' , Paper presented at International Rainbow Conference on Diversity, Inclusion and Gender Equity in Education and Work Life (IRC 2022) , 08/02/2022 - 09/02/2022 .

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<http://hdl.handle.net/10138/347367>

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publishedVersion

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The background of the slide shows a blurred scene of several people in a meeting. They are gathered around a table, looking at a tablet computer. One person's hand is visible, pointing at the screen. The overall atmosphere is professional and collaborative.

# Appearance-based discrimination at workplace: a case study in Estonia

*International Rainbow Conference 8-9.2.2022*

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# Structure of the presentation

- Aim and research questions
- Reasoning the topic
- Theoretical background
- Methods
- Empirical results
- Discussion and practical implications
- Conclusion

# Aim and research questions

This case study provides empirical research findings regarding workplace discrimination against young women in Estonia due to their physical appearance from a moral management and sociocultural viewpoint.

Research questions:

1. What kind of discrimination due to appearance took place in the exemplary cases?
2. How was appearance-based discrimination perceived in the exemplary cases, and how did it effect on the women and the organisation?
3. How did appearance-based discrimination relate to the issue of moral management and manager behaviour in the exemplary cases?

# Reasoning the topic

- Appearance-based discrimination: favouring of people perceived to be better looking and penalising those perceived less physically attractive or having the 'wrong look' in workplace (Warhurst and Nickson, 2007).
- Often difficult to prove; negative effects on individuals and organisations.
- An ethical problem: offends individual dignity and prevents equal opportunities for all.
- Behaviour of management: a significant effect on an organisation's habits and norms.
- Managers' and employers' awareness of the legislation prohibiting discrimination in the recruitment process low in Estonian working life (Turk et al. 2015)
- Socio-cultural reasons in Estonia: Soviet paternalistic and social expectations, e.g. post-soviet focus on certain beauty standards for women.

# Theoretical background

- The normalization theory – it is process whereby organisational and managerial practices become accepted and no longer questioned (Ashford and Anand 2003).
- Combination of two managerial approaches:
  - ✓ model of moral management (Carroll 1991, 2000): immoral managers, amoral managers, moral managers,
  - ✓ moral entrepreneur (Kaptein 2019).

# Methods

- A case study strategy with narrative approach.
- The data: the narratives concerning three Estonian young women.
- Data for two of the narratives: open-ended interviews. Four thematic areas were covered:
  - ✓ career challenges,
  - ✓ gender equality in the workplace,
  - ✓ physical appearance and
  - ✓ organizational culture.
- The data for the third narrative: four articles in Estonian public media
- Qualitative content analysis.





Results and  
discussion

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Host's	Tiina	Malle	Silvi
	Highly educated, smart, internationally experienced at work, a dedicated, hard-working young woman	Has a professional qualification, friendly, dedicated, highly motivated, excellent performer at work	University degree in psychology nearly completed, international experience from service and sales jobs, no problems in earlier career
Perceived as a	'Too' good-looking: blonde and slim	'Too' unattractive-looking: visible skin problems	'Too' abnormal-looking: short stature
Transition	Male to female, female to female	Female to female	Female to female
Reason for transition	Normalization through institutionalization	Normalization through rationalization	Individual act
Consequences of the transition to an	Emotional outcomes: embarrassment, anger, stress Behavioural outcome: exit from the job and country	Emotional outcomes: disappointment, decreased self-esteem Behavioural outcome: missed and rejected the work offer	Emotional outcomes: sadness, anger, personal sacrifice Behavioural outcome: was not recruited, filed a complaint to the chancellor, potentially stigmatized as a difficult employee in the labour market
Consequences of the transition to many	Loss of talent Maintenance of discriminatory organizational culture.	Loss of an employee with a high potential Emerging awareness of discrimination	Public damage to the organization's reputation, awareness of appearance-based discrimination improved.
Characteristics of the transition	Amoral unintentional pseudo-caring behaviour: Supportive and showing good will in private, but not following good will in public and in practice; not recognizing the ethical problem	Amoral unintentional, emerging moral behaviour: Prejudiced behaviour at first, regretful later and admitting previous immoral behaviour;	Lying behaviour: Illegal and immoral behaviour; impolite, deceitful and rude behaviour; emerging awareness of moral behaviour. Business reputation considerations as a driver for moral management

# Discussion

- Effects on organisations: losing talent, suffering reputation and image as employer; likely problems in future recruitment processes; can have a negative impact on collaboration with stakeholders.
- Effects on women: negative career prospects, stress, decreased self-esteem, frustration, disappointment, low motivation, low commitment.
- Even loss of talent at the societal level possible.
- Women's appearance may never be right: too attractive or too unattractive.
- Perceptions of women's attractiveness and unattractiveness can at times be rather narrow and stereotypical in Estonian workplaces.

# Discussion

- Previous research argues that appearance-based discrimination against women is most often caused by men, it can also be practiced by women toward other women.
- The adopted four theoretical categories of moral management: immoral management, amoral and moral management, and moral entrepreneurship, can be too general.
- The categories of immoral and amoral management included various types of management: prejudiced behaviour, pseudo-caring and lying.
- A category of emerging moral management occurred: the developmental aspect of morality at the level of thinking.

# Practical implications

- More information about appearance-based and gender-based discrimination in the Estonian workplaces: training and especially case-based teaching method.
- Improving the transparency, discussability, rules and formality of human resource management practices.
- Regular assessment and analysis of their ethics (e.g. ethics audit).
- Sharing best practices by advanced organizations and adopting them in activities.

# Limitations and future research

The research data consist only of three exemplary cases concerning young women in Estonia.

More diverse examples needed (for instance, other genders, different age groups, occupations, language, ethnic groups, social classes and career phases). In future research, intersectional analysis is beneficial.

The relationship between organisational and societal expectations requires more attention in the future.

Comparisons between different societies and organisations needed.

# Conclusion

- In Estonia, especially gender discrimination may be partly based on women's looks. This is harmful to employees and organisations as well as obviously the society.
- The adopted moral management model requires more conceptualisation and theorisation than it has so far been given, as well as more empirical evidence.



**Thank you for  
your attention!**

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