INTRODUCTION

Increasingly, beauty and its gendered effects are the subject matter of social science research (e.g., Wolf 1991; Craig 2002; Banks 2000; Wallace-Sanders 2002; Hunter 2004; Watson and Martin 2004). Undoubtedly, this is the case because physical attractiveness or “beauty” is a key element of how women are judged. For example, in the Miss America beauty pageant, the largest scholarship-granting organization for women, the winner’s merit is largely determined by her physical appearance as beautiful (Watson and Martin 2004).

In *The Beauty Myth*, Naomi Wolf (1991) argues that Western images of beauty—found on television and in advertisements, women’s magazines, and pornography—are detrimental to women, as well as to the men who love them. She demonstrates that the concept of “beauty” is a weapon used to make women feel badly about themselves; after all, so few can live up to the ideal. Although Wolf acknowledges that beauty plays a legitimate role in our lives and in our attractions to one another, she suggests that the problem is when beauty is defined as thinness, pertness, and youthfulness taken to extremes that are unattainable for most healthy women.

Wolf also argues that beauty is an important form of capital for women in the labor market. She indicates that as women have gained access to power structures through employment, “the power structure used the beauty myth to undermine women’s advancement” (Wolf 1991: 9). “The job market refined the beauty myth as a way to legitimize employment discrimination against women” (Wolf 1991: 10).

But beauty is not only gendered, it is also racialized (Banks 2000; Kinloch 2004). Recent research suggests that hegemonic ideals about beauty as whiteness abound within communities of color as well as within society at large (e.g., Hunter 1998, 2004; Thompson and Keith 2001; Thompson and Keith 2004).
Given the racialized nature of beauty and the importance of beauty to securing employment, the questions are: How does the beauty myth affect the workplace treatment of women of color? Is there a systematic bias in favor of women who more closely approximate the traditional European standard of beauty? Specifically, do those with lighter complexions or more physical attractiveness receive better treatment? Are they more likely to be hassled at work? Are those with darker complexions more likely to be unfairly fired or denied promotions?

This study examines the effects of physical appearance and skin color on the treatment of African American women, especially in the work setting. Using data from African American women in the 1995 Detroit Area Study, this chapter seeks to determine whether skin tone and other aspects of physical appearance are related to reports of being unfairly fired or denied promotions, being harassed at work, or being treated badly by whites or blacks.

Theoretical Considerations

Women are often referred to as the “fair” sex. According to Webster’s dictionary, the primary meaning of “fair” is “pleasing to the eye or mind.” In this expression, the word “fair” denotes that women are the visually pleasing members of our species. In addition, this understanding coincides with how women are evaluated in society. By the dictates of patriarchy, women are judged by their appearance. Dion, Bersheid, and Walster (1972) argue that in American culture, that which is considered beautiful is also considered good. Attractiveness was found to be linked to qualities such as intelligence, sociability, and virtue. Women who are deemed beautiful fare better in society (Webster and Driskell 1983).

The word fair also means “not dark.” The multiple meanings of the word “fair” suggest the Western construction of feminine beauty as lightness and connect the concept of beauty to colorism. So, for women of color, the coincidence of the meanings of the word “fair” has personal as well as social, political, and economic consequences. According to Freedman (1986: 1), “good looks are a prerequisite for femininity.” Moreover, because beauty ideals are based on Eurocentric standards, many women of color are often judged as not beautiful. The notion of femininity and the cult of true womanhood developed in the United States within a highly racialized and class-conscious context (Palmer 1983). Womanliness, and thus femininity, was achieved through race and the ability to avoid hard labor. Thus,