

READING ACTIVITY

ADULTS 5

APPEARANCE DOES MATTER



When Susan Boyle first walked onto the stage of the Britain's Got Talent TV show people immediately thought that she looked like a 47-year-old single woman, who lived alone with her cat (which in fact she was). Nobody thought for a minute that she had a chance of doing well on the show, or could ever become a star. But when she opened her mouth and started singing I Dreamed a Dream, from the musical Les Misérables, everybody was amazed. After the video of her performance went viral, journalists started talking about how wrong it is to stereotype people into categories, and how we should learn, once and for all, 'not to judge a book by its cover'.

But social scientists say that there are reasons why we judge people based on how they look. On a very basic level, judging people by their appearance means putting them quickly into categories. In the past, being able to do this was vitally important, and humans developed the ability to judge other people in seconds. Susan Fiske, a professor of psychology and neuroscience at Princeton University, said that traditionally, most stereotypes are linked to judging whether a person looks dangerous or not. 'In prehistoric times, it was important to stay away from people who looked aggressive and dominant,' she said.

One reason why our brains persist in using stereotypes, experts say, is that often they give us generally accurate information, even if all the details aren't right. Ms Boyle's appearance, for example, accurately told us a lot about her, including her socio-economic level and lack of worldly experience.

People's enthusiasm for Susan Boyle, and for other underdogs who end up winning, is unlikely to stop us from stereotyping people. This maybe one of the reasons why, although Ms Boyle expressed the hope that 'maybe this could teach them a lesson, or set an example,' she did begin to change her appearance, wearing make-up, dying her grey hair, and appearing in more stylish clothing.

1. Read the article and mark the sentences True or False.

- a. Most people predicted Susan would be successful as a singer. TRUE FALSE
- b. After her appearance on TV, people started saying that we shouldn't judge people by their appearance. TRUE FALSE
- c. Scientist think that judging by appearance is an important skill. TRUE FALSE
- d. It is more important to be able to make quick judgements about people than it used to be. TRUE FALSE
- e. When we judge people by their appearance we are usually wrong. TRUE FALSE
- f. Susan has probably realized that people will never stop judging her by her appearance. TRUE FALSE

2. Find a word or phrase in the article for the definitions.

Paragraph 1

_____ = was sent all over the internet.

_____ a _____ by _____ = judge a person by his/her appearance

Paragraph 2

_____ = absolutely essential

Paragraph 3

_____ = what social class she is and how much money she has

Paragraph 4

_____ = people who are not expected to succeed