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The Body Image Problem
62,000 Americans live
thoughts in their bodies.
Part by part, they're
what they see. Do you?



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psychology today

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Body Image

More than 62,000 *Psychology Today* readers answered *Psychology Today's* questionnaire about their attitudes toward their bodies. Those happiest about their bodies are over 30; hips and chest, not breasts or penis, are the sites of greatest dissatisfaction. Overall, most of us like what we see in the mirror quite a bit.

The Happy American Body: A Survey Report

by Ellen Berscheid, Elaine Walster, and George Bohrnstedt

"No one is free who is a slave to the body," wrote Seneca some 1,900 years ago. Judging from the advertisements, products, and best sellers that deluge us daily, we are a nation of slaves. We are obsessed with being thin, beautiful, young, and sexy, and we will go to extraordinary lengths to approach those ideals.

In the July 1972 issue of *Psychology Today*, we offered readers the opportunity to express their thoughts and feelings about the body. The topic was timely and the response overwhelming: more than 62,000 readers returned the 109-item "Body Image" questionnaire. But they were divided and ambivalent on the matter of how important attractiveness and physical looks are—or should be.

A good number of people wrote letters to protest a "whole survey" on the body. Some said that appearance is a super-

ficial matter, not worthy of undue discussion: "Perhaps if I thought I were ugly or beautiful I would spend more attention on my appearance," wrote one woman. "But as it is, this is a topic of little concern for myself. There are just many more important matters in my life." Nevertheless, she filled out the whole questionnaire.

Another woman summarized the views of many: "There's a lot more to me than my looks. I know I'm attractive, but I don't want to be attractive to someone only because of physical appearance. That would be ghastly."

By contrast, other respondents acknowledged, some reluctantly, the importance of one's appearance. "Your questionnaire made me feel as though I have floated through life ignoring my body. You have made me dissect myself and realize that I do think it's important. Now I must

learn to connect my body with the rest of myself." "The questionnaire was extremely thought-provoking," seconded an older woman. "My long-held belief that our bodies are unimportant was shattered." One honest soul confessed, with some shame, that "I discriminate against beautiful people, probably out of jealousy, and tend to label them shallow and egotistical."

Beauty and the Body. The purpose of our survey was to determine just how important bodies are to our attitudes, to self-esteem, to experiences with the same and the opposite sex. We wondered, in short, whether beauty is only skin deep, or whether it plays a lasting and important role in a person's life and self-concept. A woman who considers herself beautiful recounted her whole life story to us, "to show how very important

"I was glad to see your article on the physically disadvantaged, but it did not go deep enough. What we ugly people need is a special book of etiquette that would tell us how to behave under the following circumstances: how to respond to remarks like 'you sure are ugly'; when you see all the easy jobs go to the pretty girls when they are no more capable than you; when people stare at you; when little children run when they see you; when as a child you have to listen to people say that your parents must have committed some grave sin; when you cannot fulfill your basic needs and still keep the 10 Commandments."

surface looks have been in my life. Society places such a premium on being attractive. It counts. I may be vain. I realize beauty is only surface. But I enjoy having it, and take care of it."

Our concept of body image, which differs from some other psychological approaches, refers to one's *satisfaction* with his or her body. We measured body image with a list of 25 body parts and characteristics; for each one, the respondents indicated their satisfaction or dissatisfaction on a six-point answer scale. For example, in addition to satisfaction with "overall body appearance" and "overall facial appearance," respondents rated their hair, eyes, mouth, voice, complexion, extremities, torso, sex organs, height and weight.

Of course, we could not cover everything, and many readers hastened to add body dimensions that were important to them. "I thought your quiz very odd," wrote one man, "nothing about chest hair, pubic hair, beards, circumcision, posture." "Bowlegs!" noted an unhappy man. "Glasses!" amended a woman. "What about how one relates to one's alimentary tract: constipation, eating, and such?" asked another. One man was annoyed that we did not ask about birth defects: "Having a deformed hand, I feel insulted by your refusal to deal explicitly with this basic problem in body image."

We assumed that respondents would have a high level of dissatisfaction with their bodies, since our society places so

much emphasis on physical appearance. Further, we assumed that women would be more dissatisfied with their bodies than men, since appearance is reputedly more important for women in attracting a mate, in feeling feminine, in having high self-esteem.

Our assumptions were logical, perhaps, but they turned out to be wrong. Only seven percent of the women and four percent of the men in our sample said that they were quite or extremely dissatisfied with their overall body appearance. And only 16 percent of the women and 11 percent of the men said they were even "slightly" dissatisfied.

On the other hand, only about half are quite or extremely *satisfied*: 45 percent of the women and 55 percent of the men. Women, then, did lag behind men in having a positive body image, as we suspected. And women were slightly more likely than men to agree that *physical attractiveness is very important in day-to-day social interaction for most persons* (32 percent to 29 percent).

One's Face Is One's Fortune. The same was true for ratings of overall facial attractiveness. Almost everyone was happy with his or her face; only 11 percent of the women and eight percent of the men expressed any dissatisfaction.

Either our respondents are an unusually good-looking lot, or people worry less than advertisers assume about how they look. We know from extensive research that people do judge others on the basis

of physical attractiveness; nevertheless, our respondents are apparently unconcerned about such judgments. One woman pointed out the difficulty of interpreting such questionnaires: "I am 'quite satisfied' with myself, as I indicated. But does this mean that I am very good looking and know it—or could it mean that I'm sick of so much emphasis on physical appearances and that I just don't give a damn about a trivial thing like being 'pretty'? In my case, it is the latter." Both alternatives are possible, of course; but the important thing is that so many respondents are so satisfied.

The respondents were not uniformly delighted with specific aspects of their faces, however. Both men and women are unhappiest with their teeth—almost one third were dissatisfied; one fourth complained about their complexions; and one in five did not like their noses.

Given the American preoccupation with sex and sexual performance, we expected that women would complain about the size of their breasts, while men would worry about the size of their penises. Sex researchers and psychotherapists have observed for years that patients are unduly worried about size of their sex organs, and barroom folklore has added to people's anxieties.

We received several letters from women who worried that their breasts were too small or too big.

"Mine are much too small, and the first thousand bucks I get, they're going to get

Selecting the Sample

Because of the sheer volume of 62,000 responses, we took a sample of 2,000 questionnaires for analysis. Since the *Psychology Today* readership tends to be younger than a random sample of Americans, we decided to stratify our sample on sex and age to approximate the national distributions. The final sample consisted of half men and half women; within each sex, 45 percent were 24 years old or younger, 25 percent were between 25 and 44, and the rest were 45 or older. This procedure gave us more respondents of middle age than we would otherwise have had, and allowed us to see whether the body image of young adults differs appreciably from that of older adults.

We compared our results with those of a simple random sample of reader responses on several major questions, and found that they were virtually identical. Thus we think it fairly safe to generalize from our sample to the wider *Psychology Today* readership. The two samples differed primarily in demographic characteristics: in the random sample, for instance, 60 percent were female and only seven percent over age 45.

The body image construct. We wondered whether "body image" was a unitary phenomenon or a set of images, one for each area of the body. Respondents indicated their satisfaction with 24 body parts, and then we factor-analyzed the correlations among their answers. We found five clusters: face, ex-

trémities, mid-torso, breast/chest, and sex organs. We gave respondents a body-image subscore for each of the five body areas.

The five scores, in turn, were fairly well interrelated, showing that people tend to have an overall sense of their appearance as well as specific reactions to parts of their bodies. Our approach allowed us to compare a person's total body image with his or her attitudes and experiences, and also to study the relation between satisfaction with parts of the body and attitudes.

Overall Body Image Is:	Men	Women
above average	31	20
average	48	53
below average	21	27

"When I was an adolescent, I had the misfortune to see a sex manual which showed male and female pubic-hair distributions. Horrors—my own pubic hair was the perfect model of the feminine pubic pattern—and still is! When I was an adolescent and a young adult, I fixated on my 'inadequate' facial and body hair and was deeply troubled over my body image. So much so that until I married, I relied entirely on prostitutes for intercourse. The eternal utility of the prostitute, of course, is that, if one has the money, he will not be rejected, scorned, or ridiculed."

bigger. When your very first gynecologist says to you, out of the blue, "Do you feel unfeminine because of your small breasts, dear?" you begin to think they're a bit on the small side."

"I'm basically satisfied with my large breasts (32D) . . . but since I started going braless two years ago, I find that my breasts attract undue and undesired attention and add to my feelings of self-consciousness."

"In my 22 years I'd never met a man who wasn't foaming at the mouth over big boobs. Not until I met my husband did I realize that even a girl with small breasts can be considered sexy and attractive."

But such letters were the exception to the rule. Only one female respondent in four is dissatisfied with her breasts, and only nine percent are very dissatisfied. And to our considerable surprise, only 15 percent of the men worry about the size of their penises; barely six percent are very dissatisfied.

Apparently, popular discussion has over-emphasized the concern that men and

women have about the size and appearance of sex organs, or, again, we drew an unusually satisfied group. Possibly, the

	Quite or extremely dissatisfied		Somewhat dissatisfied	
	men	women	men	women
chest/breasts	4%	9%	14%	17%
size of sex organs	6%	1%	9%	2%
appearance of sex organs	3%	2%	6%	5%

respondents were denying their concern, but we think this interpretation less likely because of the anonymity of the questionnaires. ("I've admitted a lot of things to you that I don't even admit to myself," confided one reader.) We are encouraged that the percent of adults who might suffer low self-esteem on these grounds is lower than many have assumed.

We did, however, find one group of men who are exceptionally concerned with their body image and penis size: homosexuals. Ten percent of the men and five percent of the women had some experience with homosexuality. Male respondents who had ever engaged in ho-

mosexuality were significantly less likely than exclusive heterosexuals to have a high (above-average) body image score, 25 percent to 33 percent. And fully 45 percent of the male homosexuals had a low (below-average) image of their penises on a two-item measure (satisfaction with size and appearance of genitals), compared to only 25 percent of the exclusive heterosexuals. The relationship between body image and homosexuality held only for males; female homosexuals were no less likely than female heterosexuals to have a positive body image.

To say that most of the respondents are satisfied with their overall appearance is not to say that they are happy with all aspects of their bodies. The great concern that society places on a trim figure, especially for females, is reflected in their answers.

Almost half of the women and about one third of the men said they are unhappy with their weight, and twice as many women as men are very dissatisfied (21 percent to 10 percent). Perhaps because excess weight tends to settle in the mid-torso area—abdomen, buttocks, hips and thighs—people who were unhappy about their weight were also unhappy about these particular body parts. Women may not be worrying about the size of their breasts, but they are worrying about the size of their hips—49 percent are dissatisfied. Men may not be worrying about penis size, but some 36 percent fret over that spare-tire problem. Among all respondents, those who are happy with their weight are also more satisfied with their bodies.

We also expected to find widespread dissatisfaction with height—with men wanting to be tall and women afraid of being too tall. Not so. Only 13 percent of both sexes expressed any discontent with their height, and actual height was not related to body satisfaction.

Age and Image. Considering the inordinate emphasis that our society places on being young, looking young, and acting young, we fully expected to find older respondents becoming steadily dissatisfied with their bodies. Once again, our unpredictable sample proved us wrong.

We divided the respondents into three major age groups: 24 and younger, 25 to

Satisfaction and Dissatisfaction With Body Parts

	Quite or Extremely Dissatisfied		Any Dissatisfaction		Any Satisfaction		Quite or Extremely Satisfied	
	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male
Overall Body Appearance	7%	4%	23%	15%	77%	85%	45%	55%
face								
overall								
facial								
attractiveness	3	2	11	8	89	92	61	61
hair	6	6	19	20	81	80	53	58
eyes	1	1	6	7	94	93	80	81
ears	2	1	7	5	93	95	83	82
nose	5	2	23	16	77	84	55	64
mouth	2	1	7	6	93	94	73	75
teeth	11	10	30	28	70	72	50	46
voice	3	3	18	15	82	85	55	58
chin	4	3	13	11	87	89	67	69
complexion	8	7	28	22	72	78	48	58
extremities								
shoulders	2	3	13	11	87	89	68	67
arms	5	2	16	13	84	87	62	62
hands	5	1	19	8	81	92	60	75
feet	6	3	20	11	80	89	57	70
mid torso								
size of abdomen	19	11	50	36	50	64	29	42
buttocks (seat)	17	6	43	20	57	80	37	56
hips (upper thighs)	22	3	49	12	51	88	32	64
legs and ankles	8	4	25	11	75	89	52	69
height, weight and tone								
height	3	3	13	13	87	87	72	67
weight	21	10	48	35	52	65	31	43
general muscle								
tone or development	9	7	30	25	70	75	38	45

"Until last year I was inordinately proud of my bosom. However my left breast was removed because of a carcinoma. I must say I am satisfied with the adjustment I have made to the situation . . . my lover's continual admiration for my appearance had so bolstered my self-image that even my mastectomy was not the cruel blow that it might have been."

44, and over 45. Basically, we found no differences among these groups in overall body image. If anything, men showed a slight positive *improvement* in body image with age, especially in the mid-torso area.

	Age Group		
	Under 25	25 to 44	Over 45
Body image:			
above average	26	28	30
average	51	47	46
below average	24	26	25

We cannot conclude from these data that people's body image does or does not change as they age. Our results are cross-sectional, not longitudinal. The similarity in body image among age groups may be a result of what sociologists call "cohort effects"—the effects of being born at a particular time. Nevertheless, our results are most unexpected, and suggest that body image may be a stable phenomenon over the years.

There were only a few small differences across age groups. Older respondents reported more dissatisfaction than younger readers with teeth, and more satisfaction with complexion, presumably as adolescent skin problems clear up. And women report a sharp decline in satisfaction with their hands. Apparently hands are more central to a woman's beauty than we had thought, although if we had listened closely to detergent commercials we would have realized this.

We noted earlier that women are generally less satisfied with their bodies than are men, and this difference does not dissipate with age. Physical appearance remains slightly more important for women throughout the life cycle.

	Percent of respondents with below-average body image		
	Under 25	25 to 44	Over 45
women	27	29	31
men	21	22	18

Indeed, we suspected that older readers would tend to downplay the importance of physical attractiveness in relationships, but this was not the case. On the contrary, 33 percent of the respondents over 45 think that physical attractiveness is *very important* for most people, compared to 27 percent of respondents under 25.

We did not expect that older respondents would turn out to be so content with

their bodies, and we did not expect to find them so content, period. Many observers believe that childhood is the happiest time of one's life; they feel that life consists of progressive disillusionments that turn a person jaded and dissatisfied. Gerald Gurin, Joseph Veroff, and Sheila Feld, for example, found that the number of Americans who rate themselves as "very happy" declines progressively with age, and the number of those who say they are "not too happy" increases.

This was not true for *Psychology Today* readers, for whom age brings new pleasures. Teen-age respondents estimate that they are about 6.2 on a scale of happiness (where 10.0 is the ideal life); young adults move to 6.6; and mature adults over age 30 are the happiest of all, at 7.2. Perhaps this finding reflects the fact that *Psychology Today* readers are above the general population in both education and income, both of which are vehicles for the good life.

Both men and women are equally happy with their lives, but women are significantly less happy with their marriages than are men. Twenty-five percent of the women and 19 percent of the men were somewhat or very dissatisfied with their marriages. Reflecting this difference, women are more skeptical than men (48 percent to 41 percent) that they will still be with their partners 10 years from now.

The Body and the Self. Body image is part of a larger self-concept, which includes identities based on marriage, job, friendships and other roles. The self concept, wrote theorist Charles Horton Cooley, develops out of the reflected appraisals others have of us. People respond not only to what we say and do, but also to our appearance—clothes, grooming, physical attributes. We form opinions of our abilities, emotional states, and attractiveness largely from the feedback we get from others. Often their reactions are indirect, but we rarely misunderstand them.

Gregory Stone, a colleague at the University of Minnesota, has studied the role of appearance in social transactions. He asserts that just as people often rehearse the words they will say prior to a new situation, so they rehearse the presentation of their physical selves—they will check themselves out in a mirror, seek-

ing assurance from a quick self-appraisal.

The preadolescent years are critical in the development of the self-concept generally, and of one's body image in particular. Children can be painfully honest and painfully cruel to one of their number who is too fat, too freckled, too skinny, too odd. "When I was a child, I wished for long, straight, black hair. Mine was extremely curly-frizzy and blonde. I hated it then—no shine, no control, no doing what the other kids did with their hair," wrote one woman.

We expected that a person who got such taunts as a child would incorporate them into a negative body image that might last for years. We asked readers whether their peers had made fun of them or rejected them for any aspect of their appearance when they were children. And we asked them to rate their attractiveness as children relative to that of their peers. It seems that childhood teasing has a lasting effect. People who were teased as children and who felt homely are less satisfied with their bodies as adults.

Percent of Respondents With Below-Average Body Image Teased As Children

	Never	Sometimes	Frequently
	25	31	37
women			
men	15	26	27

Our own experiences indicated that boys are much more likely to be the initiators and recipients of such taunts than girls, and we were right. The relationship between having been made fun of as a child and later body image was stronger for males than for females. Apparently being overweight was the main reason for ridicule. "The horror of being 14 and standing in front of that mirror and seeing the skinny person crying in the disguise of a fat boy, was the first time I saw the realities of life," wrote one young man. "I realized that no one, absolutely no one, would ever love me, a fat slob. The next month I lost 30 pounds." But for men there was also a relationship between childhood taunts and present dissatisfaction with their faces, indicating that their weight was not the only thing that bothered some of them as boys.

One reader aptly pointed out that we did not ask about the effects of parents on their children's body image. "My mother had a few pet names for me such as

'prune face,' and 'garbage disposal,' she wrote. "These comments had more of an influence on me than anything my peers had to say."

Good Looks and Self-Esteem. In their studies of body image done in the 1950s, Paul Secord and Sidney Jourard found that college students who had negative body images also tended to have low self-esteem. Our survey gave us the opportunity to test this relationship on a more diverse group of people.

We used a version of the Janis-Field-Eagley Self-Esteem Measure, 10 questions such as, *How often do you dislike yourself?*, *How sure of yourself do you feel among strangers?*, *How often do you feel self-conscious?*, and *Overall, how confident do you feel about your abilities?*

We found that for both sexes, body image is strongly related to self-esteem. Only 11 percent of those with a below-average body image (compared to 50 percent of those with an above-average body image) had an above-average level of self-esteem. We also looked at the links between satisfaction with various parts of the body and self-esteem, and found that, for both sexes, the face makes the difference. People who are satisfied with their faces are more self-confident.

For males, the body part that had the second strongest impact on self-esteem is the chest; for females, the second most important factor was the mid-torso area, reflecting their worry about weight. Satisfaction with sex organs or torso was not significantly related to self-esteem for men or women. This provides further evidence that the importance of penis size and breast size is exaggerated in this society; our respondents paid little attention to size of sex organs. A woman's self-esteem relates to her feeling pretty and slim; a man's self-esteem relates to being handsome and having a muscular chest.

Most psychologists have overlooked the connection between body image and self-esteem. Obviously, body image is only one component of self-esteem; a person's assessment of his or her abilities and other attributes is equally important. Some respondents felt that other sources of self-esteem can supersede the relevance of body image; looks don't matter, runs this view, since I'm bright/talented/charming or whatever.

"I was quite self-conscious when I was younger, even though I was probably average in looks, now I am less worried and embarrassed about my looks—I think because I feel more intelligent and intellectually interesting."

But others clearly distinguished their
(Continued on page 126.)

86 Proof Blended Scotch Whisky © 1973 Paddington Corp., N.Y.



For the sporting life.



On July 10, 1929 the Philadelphia Phillies and Pittsburgh Pirates played a game in which there was a home run hit in every inning.



A football game was played between Washington State College and San Jose State College in 1955 that was attended by only one paying customer in near zero temperature.



During the 19th century early golf balls were made of leather bags stuffed with feathers and sewn closed. The longest measured drive was 175 yards.

A scotch whisky with an Italian name? In 1749, Giacomo Justerini followed a voluptuous opera singer to London and stayed to found the firm of Justerini and Brooks—purveyors throughout the world of one of life's more pleasurable participation events.

J&B
RARE
SCOTCH
The Pleasure Principle

"At the age of 12 I realized that I was a homosexual. To relieve my tension I ate and ate until at the height of five feet seven inches I weighed 180 and became known as Fats. . . I am now 23 and six feet and weigh 155. I wear contacts, have my hair styled, and try to look as neat as possible. I have a lover for the first time who is more than a quick one-night stand. . . I somehow appreciate inner beauty more than the plastic, store-bought, TV-ad beauty that drives so many in this world [because I was ugly as an adolescent]. My lover is physically beautiful. I refuse to answer if I was attracted to his outer or inner beauty first."

body image from their personal traits.

"No problems with self-confidence, fellers. There's never been any doubt that my intellectual (and lately, sensitivity-type) abilities have always been at the top of the ladder. But that doesn't mean I have a good, or even accurate, body-image picture."

Of course, one trouble with survey findings is that we cannot determine cause and effect. A positive body image may increase a person's self-esteem, or basic self-esteem may lead a person to feel good about his or her body. Our readers themselves disagreed on what causes what:

"Body image is so important. If I had been plain instead of pretty I would be a much weaker and sadder person."

"I rather like my body, imperfect though it is. My body gets more and more pleasing as I grow more self-assured and begin to like myself more."

"My own opinion of my physical faults doesn't seem to matter. Especially as I get older. I could be clubfooted and cross-eyed but that wouldn't matter cuz there's *me* inside. . ."

Or it may be that the groundwork for both positive body image and high self-esteem is set early in life. "I have a childhood bank of positive responses to draw on," said one happy woman. "Probably it is because I was little and cute and jolly and bright in my youth that I'm able to ignore it now."

Self-esteem—the general feeling that one is competent and confident—spills over into other areas of personality. Respondents who have above average positive body images also consider themselves to be more likeable, assertive, conscientious and even more intelligent than the "average person." For example, of those who rate their body images as above average, 69 percent also indicate that they're more likeable than the average person, compared to 40 percent of those who rate their body images below average.

People who are happy with their bodies

Body Image Is:

	Above Average		Average		Below Average	
	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women
Sex with 10 or more partners	38	24	28	5	18	11
Disagree that body feature makes them a poor sex partner	96	91	79	78	58	52

may actually be more assertive and likeable than those who have negative body images. Or they *think* they are. One young man explained that in the last year his body image has changed very much for the better, as a result of his personal development: "I've gone from considering myself some sort of asshole to believing that I'm a charismatic individual nearly impossible to dislike. . . I have more friends than I know what to do with."

Sex and the Body. Some respondents may have chosen to deny, for themselves, the importance of body image in contributing to self-esteem and happy sex lives, but they are wrong when it comes to most people. Positive body image was strongly related to sexual satisfaction. Men and women who like their bodies have had more sexual partners, have more sexual activity, and enjoy sex more than those who have negative body images.

People who are dissatisfied with their bodies also tend to find it "difficult to relate well to persons of the opposite sex," and to agree that *one or more of my body features probably makes me a poor sex partner* (although one respondent amended: "if you would have asked me *which* body feature, I would have answered, 'My mind'").

Most surprising to us was that men who are dissatisfied with their bodies also tend to feel uncomfortable around other men. Body image and discomfort with the same sex were not so strongly linked for women. This finding completely contradicts the stereotype, which says that

women are always comparing themselves physically to other women and worrying about the results. Instead it turns out that men are the worriers. We hypothesize that men try to gain power and enhance their status in relation to other men in literally a physical way. Men may need to feel that they look big and powerful in order to impress other men; perhaps women rely upon clothes and style rather than upon body attributes to compare themselves to other women.

Contrary to the *Playboy* ideal of the single man as carefree, sexy, and free-wheeling, bachelors in this sample tended to be more dissatisfied with their bodies than married men did. There was no difference between single and married women. Apparently unmarried males are concerned about sexual performance: the lower their body-image score, the more they felt that some body feature makes them poor sexual partners, and the more dissatisfied they were about penis size and shape.

We don't really know why this finding should be so, except that sexual performance is more of a worry to single men than to married men or women. Perhaps they are single precisely because they are apprehensive about sex and their bodies, and thereby avoid intimate relationships with women; perhaps the current life-style of the single man fosters such apprehension. Women, by contrast, are permitted, indeed *supposed* to await male initiative.

Current research and some armchair observation find that beautiful people have an advantage over less attractive ones, at least until their 30s [see "Beauty and the Best," by Ellen Berscheid and Elaine Walster, *PT*, March 1972]. We wondered what happens to the Beautiful Person when he or she gets older. There are two theories on the matter.

The first is the "beauty is a joy forever"

In comparison with "average person," respondent feels more:

Body Image Is:

	Above Average	Average	Below Average
Likeable	69	54	40
Intelligent	86	75	69
Assertive	60	45	30

"I was 18 before I knew that missing a few fingers from each hand made me a cripple. I spent my first 25 years trying to pass [as normal], despite dating and job experiences that were a continual reminder. Finally in therapy I got down to the nitty-gritty and began to lift up my successful 'adjustment' in hopes that the bad bugs would crawl away from under the rocks. I still pass when I can and cooperate in the game when it seems the tactful thing to do. It may be that I help the game by superimposing normal hands over mine in my mind—if I could study my gestures in slow motion, would I find ghostly fingers finishing the gestures that my fingers could not carry through? How much my body image is wishful thinking and how much is true, I can never be positive I know."

argument. This view maintains that beauty enables men and women to get status, social skills, prestige, popularity and other one-ups; the beauty can capitalize on these advantages even when physical attractiveness fades. The Beautiful Person gets a good head start in youth, which lasts through life.

Josselin deJong observes that beauty is to a female's advantage in the marriage market in widely diverse cultures, and Glen Elder Jr. notes that this advantage has held up in diverse time periods as well.

In our own culture, Gilbert Kaats and Keith E. Davis found that beautiful college women date more frequently and have more male friends, report themselves to have been in love more often, and have had more sexual experience than women of medium attractiveness. College students today may wish to believe that physical attractiveness is trivial, but in fact they too consider it to be important. Karen Dion, Berscheid and Walster recently showed male and female college students yearbook photos of physically attractive and unattractive men and women, and asked the students to estimate what the future held in store for the person in each photo. (To ensure that the students would try to be accurate, we warned them that their estimates would be checked against actual information about that individual's life.)

The students predicted that the beautiful people would have fulfilling lives, happier marriages, and more prestigious occupations. (They assumed that the attractive and unattractive people would be equally successful on only one dimension—parenthood.) Our students, along with many theorists, assume that beauty is a guarantee of lifelong happiness.

The second school of thought about the aging beauty proposes the "beauty is short-lived" argument. This view warns that beauty is soon ravaged by time, causing the beauty to become bitter and miserable. The beauty has been able to rely for so long on good looks for self-esteem that he or she is left with nothing when the external attributes fade. Relationships turn sour. Clifford Kirkpatrick and John Cotton warned that "husbands [of beautiful but aging women] may feel betrayed and disillusioned, even dis-

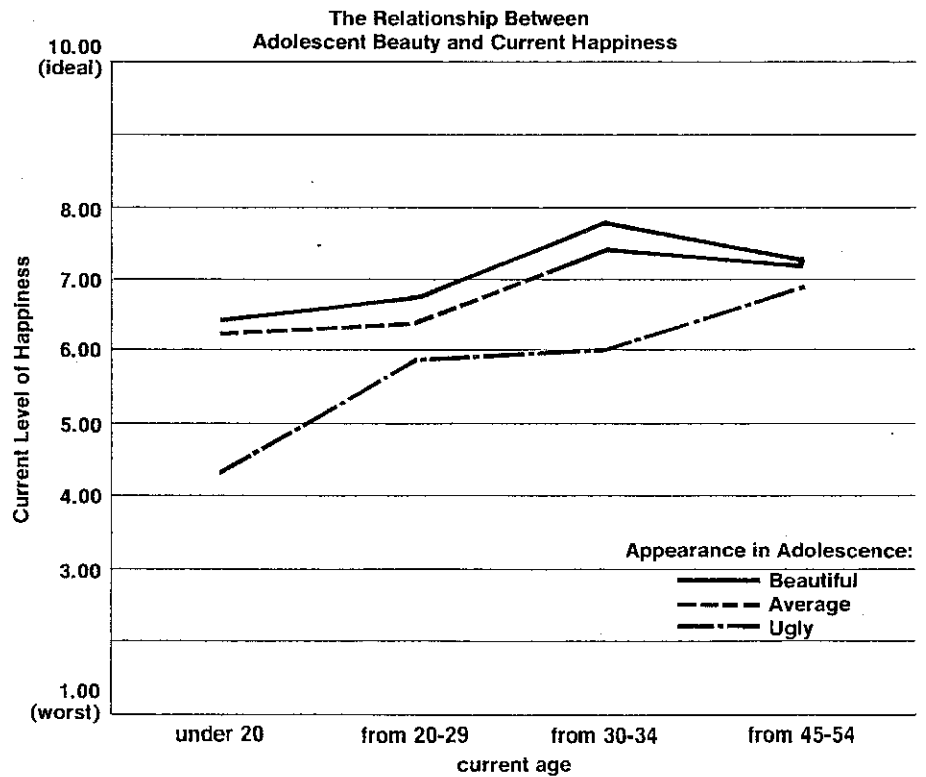
gusted with the reliance on charms which have faded with the passing of years." (They neglect to mention how aging wives will feel about their once-hand-some husbands.)

Berscheid, Walster and Richard Campbell found some evidence that the young beauty faces later disillusionment. The *more* attractive a woman was in her 20s (judging from college photographs), the *less* happy and the *less* well-adjusted to her current life she was in her 40s. We did not find such a relationship among men. These results, which were not terribly strong, suggest that a person's happiness may depend to some extent on the contrast between one's present situation and the past. Unattractive people, who suffer a less dramatic change in physical appearance, presumably are happier for that reason. To investigate these opposing views, we asked PT readers a series of questions: how physically attractive, compared to others of their age, they felt they were at various ages (in childhood, 13 to 19, 20 to 30, etc.). To be sure, we cannot assume that respondents' evaluations are completely objective. Previous studies have indicated that although there

is a significant relationship between a person's estimate of his or her attractiveness and the judgments of others, the *amount* of agreement is not nearly as strong as one might wish. Thus, although their answers have some basis in reality, our conclusions must be tentative.

Then we asked readers to recall how happy they had felt at various ages and how happy they expect to be in the future, marking their estimates on a ladder with 10 rungs (10 being the "ideal, happy life" and one being the worst possible life). We found that childhood and adolescent beauty go hand-in-hand with early happiness. The unattractive child or teen-ager is miserable, and remembers that misery long into adulthood. "I always thought I was an ugly kid—you know—pimples, crooked teeth, frizzy hair, skinny, glasses, and the worst curse—flat-chested," mourned one woman.

But childhood beauty has little connection to a person's *later* happiness. By the time our respondents reached college age, it made little difference whether they were attractive as children or not. "It is only within the last couple of years that I have been able to look in the mirror and



"At a consciousness-raising session, several friends and I decided to go around in a circle and name our most hated features. Hearing each other, we realized how minutely our 'ugly' features were noticed. It was definitely a good thing to do."

"I am neither very satisfied nor very dissatisfied with any particular aspect of my body. Yet this is not to say that I am generally pleased with my body. I have always found the physical aspects of life cumbersome and the spiritual/intellectual aspects inviting."

say, "Yes, you are beautiful," " continued the woman who was an "ugly kid." "And I still have crooked teeth and rotten eyesight, and I still wear glasses."

Teen-age Misery. Adolescent beauty, by contrast, leaves its mark for years. Unattractive teen-agers are the least happy among all respondents; and people who are now between 30 and 44, but who were beautiful adolescents, are the most happy. However, by middle age happiness levels seem to even out.

This suggests that both the "beauty is a blessing" and the "beauty is a curse" theories have an element of truth. Beautiful adolescents do have an advantage over their peers, and they are happier than less attractive people throughout young adulthood. In the 45-to-54 age bracket, though, differences in happiness between those who were once pretty or homely in adolescence have largely disappeared. Thus beautiful teen-agers are never *less* happy than their peers; they are simply no happier once they pass 45.

On the other hand, fading beauty does take its toll in happiness. Once-beautiful people become slightly less happy in middle age than they once were, whereas unattractive people get progressively happier as time goes on. For beautiful people, happiness does not escalate as rapidly throughout life as it does for their less-attractive peers. Adolescent appearance affects adult self-esteem and body image as well as happiness. Adults who thought they were unattractive teen-agers currently have lower self-esteem than those who felt beautiful, even those adults who blossomed in maturity. Perhaps such people never fully accept the fact that they have changed; the "ugly duckling"

feeling lasts long after the swan has emerged. "... Throughout my childhood I was praised as the intellectual, quite thoughtful, conscientious, humorous child of the family—but I desperately wanted to be pretty," wrote one woman. "As a result, I have never believed a single compliment on my looks or appearance, and mistrust people who pay them." Remembered comparisons with one's adolescent peers linger. "While I'm above average height," noted one man, "I still think of myself as small, because I was schooled among older boys."

To explore the ugly-duckling phenomenon, we contrasted people who felt their attractiveness had changed over the years—for better or worse—with those who have stayed the same. Fewer than half of the respondents maintained that they are as pretty or plain now as they have ever been; most respondents, then, believe they have changed. For example, some said they were beautiful as children, homely as adolescents, and good-looking again as adults.

To assess the impact of change in looks, we divided respondents who were over age 30 into five groups: those who felt they had always been beautiful at every developmental level; those who had sometimes been beautiful but other times felt average; those who have always felt average in looks; those who vacillated between average and unattractive; and those few who felt ugly throughout their lives. Clearly, the more time one has served in a physically unattractive body, the less happy and self-confident one is.

Sudden Beauty or Beastliness. We also asked our respondents whether and when they had ever experienced a sud-

den, dramatic change in their appearance: rapid weight gain or loss, for example, cosmetic surgery, war injuries, accidents, and the like. To our surprise, 38 percent of our respondents reported one such body change, and an additional 15 percent have had more than one dramatic change.

We suspected that a sudden change in appearance would produce stress. We predicted that the respondents who had experienced change, which included many who had changed for the better, would be less happy than those who had never changed. That prediction turned out to be correct.

Some respondents reported more than one dramatic change, for the better or the worse, in appearance. If change is unsettling, even if it is positive, these multiple-changers should be less happy, feel less self-confident, and have even worse body images than those who had changed only once or never. Again, the data supported our hunch.

We thought that people who have always been beautiful, or always been homely, would tend to dismiss the importance of physical attractiveness. The beauty would rather think that his popularity is due to sterling personality traits than to external attributes; the homely person would rationalize that he or she cannot get popularity from looks. But people who have experienced one major change in their appearance should find attractiveness to be a salient part of their lives; they cannot ignore it. In fact, this was the case. They tended to rate physical attractiveness as significantly more important than those who had never changed at all.

The Matching Hypothesis. When psychologists point out that a business relationship will endure only so long as it is profitable to both participants, everyone agrees and dismisses the statement for being obvious. Yet when psychologists maintain that love relationships are equally dependent for survival on the mutual exchange of rewards, people demur. They insist indignantly that love affairs are special, untainted by crass considerations of social exchange.

Equity theorists, however, insist that even in the most intimate relations exchange principles determine how stable

Consistency of Beauty and Current Happiness, Self-Esteem, and Body Satisfaction*

	(N)	Current Happiness	Self-Esteem	Body Satisfaction
Always Beautiful	118	7.50	38.99	116.94
Sometimes Beautiful; Sometimes Average	272	7.46	37.59	112.05
Always Average	315	7.10	33.64	105.95
Sometimes Ugly; Sometimes Average	59	6.68	32.28	94.02
Always Ugly	16	6.19	29.00	85.50
Range		0-10	10-50	24-144

*The higher the number, the happier, more confident, and more satisfied one is.

and how satisfying a relationship is. Peter Blau wrote that people end up with the partners they "deserve." The more desirable a person is, the more demand for his or her time there will be, and the more desirable a suitor will have to be to "win."

Market considerations insure that each individual gets a mate of roughly equal desirability. To keep a highly desirable mate, a person must make it worth the while of the mate to stay in the relationship.

Desirability and Dating. In the 1930s, sociologist Willard Waller did his classic "rating-and-dating" study of college students. "Young men are desirable dates according to their rating on a scale of campus values," he discovered. "In order to have a class A rating, they must belong to one of the better fraternities, be prominent in [prestigious] activities, have a copious supply of spending money, be well-dressed, smooth in manners and appearance, have a good line, dance well, and have access to an automobile." Class-A girls had "good clothes, a smooth line, the ability to dance well, and popularity as a date." Class-A men, Waller found, almost always dated class-A women. Today these specific criteria for desirability are obsolete. However, such traits as beauty, personality, warmth, and socioeconomic status are surely still important assets.

The Fragility of Mismatched Pairs. Considerable research indicates that people choose—or reluctantly end up with—mates of equal desirability. Irwin Silverman recently sent teams of observers to dating places such as bars, dances, and movie theaters. The observers agreed that the dating couples were extraordinarily well-matched in attractiveness.

Sara Kiesler and Roberta Baral did an experiment with 43 Yale men. They told half of the students that they had scored impressively high on an intelligence and creativity test; in short, they led the men to believe that they were socially desirable. They told the rest of the students that they failed the test, that their social desirability was embarrassingly low.

They tested each student individually. During a break in the testing, an experimenter and the student went to a nearby coffee shop to relax. They sat down next to a female student, who chatted for a while with the experimenter. Sometimes the coed, who was a confederate of the researchers, wore fashionable clothes and make-up, and looked pretty. Sometimes she was a mess: she wore heavy glasses, rumpled skirt with blouse that didn't match, hair tied back severely.

After a while, the experimenter excused herself to make a phone call, and the coed carefully noted whether the Yale student expressed any interest in her, whether he ignored her, complimented her, asked her out, offered to buy her coffee, and so on.

Kiesler and Baral found strong support for the matching hypothesis. When the men felt desirable and high in self-esteem, they expressed far more romantic interest in the pretty girl than in the

please their partners. We wondered what happens to a person who beats the odds, who wins a partner far more desirable than himself. Equity theory predicts that he or she might not be so lucky after all. For one thing, he will worry about losing his mate, who has every reason to leave him; he may feel he could never do so well again.

Waller, citing the epigram that "in every love affair there is one who loves and one who permits himself to be loved,"

Who loves most?	Much More Than I	Partner's Desirability: Slightly More or Same	Less Than I
I love more	40	21	16
Equal	40	49	24
Partner loves more	20	29	60
	100%	100%	100%

dowdy one. When their self-esteem had been threatened, however, they were more interested in the dowdy girl than in the beauty.

We concluded, then, that people do tend to choose partners of their own level of attractiveness and desirability. However, other evidence suggested that people don't submit to necessity gladly; they keep trying to woo partners who are more desirable. Romantic choices are a delicate compromise between the ideal and the deserved.

Among the PT respondents who are currently in stable relationships, 58 percent say that they are equally matched. One woman objected to the questions on comparability: "I disagree with the

pointed out that such inequitable relationships are costly to both partners. The less-dependent person may feel guilty and uncomfortable about exploiting his or her mate, while continuing to do so; the more dependent partner suffers exploitation and insecurity. Waller concluded that such lopsided affairs soon come to a sad conclusion.

The Consequences of Success. We expected that a person who knows his partner is more desirable than he is will have conflicting emotions: he should be eager to hold onto the partner, to love the partner intensely; yet he should feel insecure about the permanence of the relationship.

Indeed, our data show that the more one's partner's desirability and attractiveness exceed one's own, the more one loves, and the more one worries.

To measure a respondent's insecurity about his or her relationship, we asked couples (married, living together, or dating) how happy they are, how satisfied they are with their present relationship, and how certain they are that they will be with their current partner 10 years from now.

Individuals who are matched with equally desirable partners are happier, more satisfied with the relationship, more confident that it will last, and have fewer sexual problems than respondents who are mismatched. The people who are most insecure are those who are merely dating an unexpectedly attractive partner. Married respondents are far more confident that they can hold on to a too-desirable partner.

Avis Tries Harder. Once the lucky person has attracted an exceptional mate, his next problem is to figure out how to keep her. How can the nervous husband

Describe your partner's desirability:	Men	Women
Much more desirable than I	13	11
Slightly more desirable or the same	75	78
Less desirable than I	11	11
Who now loves most in your relationship?		
I love more	20	27
We love equally	46	45
My partner loves more	34	29
Percent who make great or considerable effort to please partner:	78	80

assumption that one person loves more than another in most relationships," she wrote. "I think it's a matter of expression. My husband's way of showing he cares is quite different from mine, yet I can't say either of us loves more." However most women were not as philosophical as this writer. Slightly more women said that they love their husbands more than their husbands love them, and women were more likely than men to say they make a considerable or great effort to

Effort respondent makes to please partner:

Great
Considerable
Minimal or none

Much More Than I

32
54
13

Partner's Physical Desirability:

Slightly More or Same

18
63
18

Less Than I

6
56
39

or wife reduce insecurity? Only one avenue is open; he or she must shower his partner with compensatory benefits. Hertz forces Avis to try harder.

Equity theory proposes that if a couple is badly matched on one dimension, say physical attractiveness, they will try to right the imbalance on other dimensions.

In his *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle was the first to propose the compensation hypothesis: "Because the wife is inferior to her husband, she ought to love him more than he her; algebraically, this would compensate for their inequality and result in a well-balanced relationship." Aristotle may have been an unredeemable male chauvinist, but we decided to test the compensation theory anyway.

First we asked respondents the amount of effort that they and their partners make to please each other: great, considerable, minimal, or none. And indeed, people who think their partners are more physically attractive and desir-

able than they, make more effort to please them.

The Jacqueline Kennedy-Aristotle Onassis merger illustrates a second form of compensation: she has the looks, he has the money. Apparently this arrangement is popular. We asked respondents to assess their own and their partners' socioeconomic status (income, occupation, and education). Income was the critical factor. The *more* attractive one's partner, the *less* money the partner earns, relative to oneself. That is, if a man thinks his wife is more beautiful a mate than he, he makes up for it with a hefty salary. And the same was true for women. Wives who worry that their husbands are more attractive than they compensate by making more money.

Beauty, the Body, and Soul. George Bernard Shaw once noted that "beauty is all very well, but who ever looks at it when it has been in the house three days?" The answer is, almost everybody. Our respondents strongly agreed that physical

attractiveness is important in getting along with others, in acquiring mates, in having good sex lives, in feeling satisfied with themselves. Good looks were important to respondents from small towns and large cities, to people who have traveled widely and those who have stayed home, to people who deal constantly with strangers and those who work with friends.

Personality and self-esteem do not rest exclusively on satisfaction with one's body, but neither is the body an irrelevant shell in which the soul happens to live. We treat beautiful people differently from the way we treat homely ones, and denying this truth will not make a person's looks less important.

Some PT readers have escaped the tyranny of attractiveness, but others admit they never will: "I am nearly 30 years old, a success in a field few women enter, a good speaker, conversationalist, and clown . . . I am happily married and feel valued by my family, but I'd chuck it all if some Mephistophelean character offered me the option of the kind of long-legged, aquiline, tawny beauty praised in myth and toothpaste ads."



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