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The Social Psychology of Beauty

(1850-1990)

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Artists, philosophers, and scientists have long speculated about whether “Beauty is in the eye of the beholder” or if there are universal standards of beauty. In the 5th century B.C., for example, Aristotle proposed that the Golden Mean was a universal ideal. Plato took the opposite position—assuming that beauty resided in the “rare and exotic.

Since William McDougall’s pioneering 1908 *Social Psychology* text, scholars have assumed that culture has a profound impact on the perception of physical attractiveness; try as they might, until recently they could identify few cultural universals. In 1859, for example, Charles Darwin argued that it was critically important for scholars to discover what various peoples considered sexually appealing. Only then could they predict the course of sexual selection, and, ultimately, human evolution. Yet, in all his observations Darwin failed to identify the desired universals. After surveying the standards of various tribes throughout the world, he concluded: “It is certainly not true that there is in the mind of many any universal standard of beauty with respect to the human body.”

In 1887, the Victorian Henry T. Finck set out his theory of beauty. Finck is a delight to read. It makes one feel smugly superior to encounter someone so self-righteous, so opinionated . . . and so wrong. Finck’s singular thesis was that primitive people were nature’s crude “experiments.” Humankind started out, he thought, exceedingly ugly. But people continued to evolve, becoming more perfect and better looking all the time. Other nations had a long way to go. The Hungarians, he claimed, are “of a repulsive ugliness.” “The typical Jew “has a long, thick crooked nose, bloated lips.” “The women of France are the ugliest in the world.” American girls’ faces “suggest consumption, scrofula, anaemia, and neuralgia.” Finally, evolution and good looks reached a pinnacle in the upper-class English gentleman. (Coincidentally—and happily for him—Henry Finck just happened to be in just this category.)

In one landmark 1950s study, Clelland Ford and Frank Beach conducted a meta-analysis of beauty standards in more than 200 tribal societies. They could find no universal standards of allure.

By the late 1970s, however, scholars began to make some progress in understanding the nature of physical attractiveness. Theoretical advances (in social

and evolutionary psychology) and new technologies (in computer video simulations, fMRI imaging, and chemical assays) allowed scholars to gain a clearer understanding of the nature of beauty. Today, scholars have discovered a number of cultural universals:

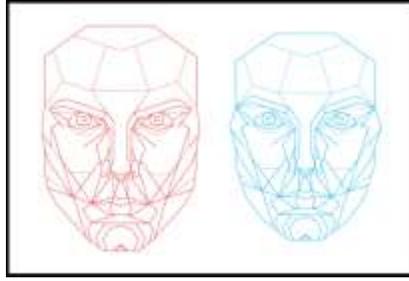
- Men and women are aroused by masculine and feminine faces and forms associated with youth, health, vigor, and reproductive fitness. Men find potential mates most appealing if they possess prototypic feminine traits, such as thick shiny hair, large eyes, dewy skin, high cheekbones, and lush full lips. Women's preferences in men are more complex—varying with culture, intensity of relationship (a “one-night-stand” versus a long term, committed relationship), and phase of the ovulatory cycle. Generally, however, men are perceived to be most appealing if they possess prototypic masculine traits such as prominent cheekbones, a firm jaw, and a strong chin. (Cunningham, 1986; Gangestad & Scheyd, 2005.)

- People find individual faces—with all their quirks and flaws—less appealing than computer generated “average” faces. They do indeed seem to prefer “the Golden Mean.” In 1990, in an influential study, Langlois and Roggman collected an array of 96 men's and 96 women's “mug shots,” digitized them, and then printed out composites—based on averages of, say, 4, 8, 16, or 32 faces. These scholars, and many researchers since, discovered that average faces are judged to be more physically attractive than the individual faces that contribute to the multi-face composites. Further, the more faces that are added to the mix (say, 16 or 32 instead of 4 or 8), the more attractive the computer generated prototypes are thought to be.

- People prefer those who possess symmetrical faces and bodies. Theorists have argued that facial and bodily asymmetries indicate a poor genetic heritage, since they may be caused by genetic mutations, pathogens, toxins, and other stressors. Ergo: symmetry should signal youth, health, and reproductive fitness. Although some researchers have found that people do prefer symmetrical faces (see Marquardt, 2002), most evolutionary biologists find only weak evidence for such a preference (see Gangestad & Scheyd, 2005).

- People prefer well-proportioned faces—ones that possess harmony and certain repeating mathematical patterns. Those whose faces match a “Golden Decagon Matrix.”

Insert Illustration #1 and #2 here



Matrix provided by Dr. Stephen R. Marquardt, D. D. S. Frontal template of male and female beauty (see www.beautyanalysis.com for full information).

- People prefer male and female bodily forms that signal reproductive fitness. In 1993, Singh proposed that although in different cultures men may prefer slim versus plump women, men universally prefer women with a low waist-to-hip ratio (WHR). Women generally have lower WHRs than do men—probably because women tend to store fat in the breasts and hips, which increases their fitness for gestation, lactation, and child rearing. True to prediction, in a wide variety of cultures, men have been found to prefer a lower than average WHR—the most preferred WHR typically being about 0.7. This numerical preference is not universal, however, (see Gangestad & Scheyd, 2005). Scholars also find that women prefer men with broad shoulders, a V-shaped torso, and a muscular, lean body (Gangestad & Scheye, 2005).

The current consensus is that both Nature and Nurture affect men and women’s aesthetic and sexual preferences.

The Importance of Beauty in Everyday Life

Scientists find that most people, most of the time, are greatly biased in favor of the good-looking. The Greek philosopher Sappho contended that “what is beautiful is good.” Today, scientists have come to a fuller understanding of just how, where, when, and why physical appearance is important. There seem to be four steps in the stereotyping process:

1. Most people know that it is not fair to discriminate against the unattractive (they would be incensed if others discriminated against *them*).
2. Privately, most people take it for granted that attractive and unattractive people are different. Generally, they assume that what is beautiful is good and what is unattractive is bad.
3. Most people treat good-looking and average people better than they treat the unattractive.
4. As a consequence, a self-fulfilling prophecy occurs. The way people are treated shapes the kinds of people they become.

There is evidence that people do perceive attractive and unattractive people differently. In one classic experiment, social psychologists showed college students photographs of men and women who varied markedly in appearance and asked them about their first impressions of the people depicted. Young adults assumed that handsome men and beautiful women must possess nearly all the virtues. The good looking were assumed to be more sociable, outgoing, poised, interesting, exciting, sexually responsive, kind, nurturing, warm, modest, strong, and sensitive than their homely peers. They were also expected to have happier and more fulfilling lives.

Not only do people think that the attractive are special, but they also treat them that way. Clinicians spend more time with good-looking clients. Teachers reward more attractive students with better grades. Executives are more likely to hire and promote good-looking men and women and to pay them higher salaries. The good-looking are more likely to receive assistance when they are in trouble. Attractive criminals are less likely to get caught, to be reported to the authorities, to be found guilty, or receive strict sentences than are others.

Society's biases give good-looking men and women a marked evolutionary advantage in intimate relationships, as well. The attractive have an easier time meeting potential dates and mates, attract more appealing dates and mates, and end up with better dating and marital relationships. If, in spite of all these advantages, things go wrong, they find it easier to start anew.

What effect does such stereotyping have on men and women? It turns out that the good-looking and unattractive are not so different as people assume them to be. Self-esteem and self-concept are positively related to how good-looking people *think* they are, but not to actual appearance. In general, the personalities of the attractive and unattractive differ only slightly, if at all.

Attractive and unattractive people *do* seem to differ in one critical respect, however. The good-looking appear to be more confident in romantic and social situations and to possess more social skills than their peers. People expect the good-looking to be charming, so they treat them as if they are. As a consequence, the good-looking become more socially skilled.

This self-fulfilling aspect of physical attractiveness was demonstrated in a classic study by Mark Snyder, Elizabeth Tanke, and Ellen Berscheid. Men and women at the University of Minnesota were recruited for a study on the acquaintance process. First, men were given a Polaroid snapshot and biographical information about their partners. In fact, the snapshot was a fake; it depicted either a beautiful or a homely woman. Men were then asked their first impressions of this "potential date." Those who believed they had been assigned a beautiful partner expected her to be sociable, poised, humorous, and socially skilled. Those who thought they had been assigned an unattractive partner expected her to be unsociable, awkward, serious, and socially inept. Such prejudice is not surprising; it is known that good-looking people make exceptionally good first impressions.

The next set of findings, however, *was* startling. Men were asked to get acquainted with their partners via a telephone call. Men's expectations had a dramatic impact on the way they talked to their partners. Men who thought they were talking to a beautiful woman were more sociable, sexually warm, interesting, independent, sexually permissive, bold, outgoing, humorous, and socially skilled than were men who thought their partner was homely. The men assigned to an attractive woman were also more comfortable, enjoyed themselves more, liked their partners more, took the initiative more often, and used their voices more effectively. In brief, men who thought they were talking to a beautiful woman tried harder.

Within the space of a telephone conversation, women (regardless of their true appearance) became what men expected them to be. Women who were talked to as if they were beautiful soon began to sound that way. They became unusually animated, confident, and socially skilled. Those who were treated as if they were unattractive became withdrawn, lacked confidence, and seemed awkward.

The men's prophecies had been fulfilled.

A final observation: The evidence makes it clear that the good looking have an advantage. However, a careful analysis of all existing data makes it clear that the relationship between appearance and advantage is not a linear one. The extremely attractive have only a small advantage over their more ordinary peers. What is really important is to be at least average. Alas, it is the unattractive and the disfigured who suffer the greatest social costs of prejudice.

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