Aesthetic Dentistry

Beauty Under The Magnifying Glass: Is There A Universal Beauty Ideal? 
Part III of “The Psychology of Aesthetics”

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Mankind has always been interested in beauty and attractiveness. The search for a universal beauty ideal is a major topic in everyday life as well as in science. Evolutionary and cognitive theories try to give answers to the question of what is perceived as being beautiful and why this is so. In social psychology, it is furthermore investigated which effects in social life correlate with an attractive appearance.

The second part of “The Psychology of Aesthetics” (“Perception of Beauty: What is Beauty?”), which appeared in No. 23, 3rd Edition, mainly dealt with cognitive theories that use a neural basis to explain why people prefer symmetric or average faces. This third part in the series explains evolutionary theories, which are rarely involved in current scientific studies.

All the different angles clutched at straws when deviations from the prevalent beauty ideal can be found. Attractiveness underlies several basic principles of evolutionary selection (e.g., Buss & Barnes 1986; after Doove, Bojahn, & Fischer 1996; Kozlowski & Trust 1995).

The aim of selection processes is mainly the stabilization of the species where extreme characteristics are avoided. Individuals who come out in the global population as less endangered of mutation than those individuals whose characteristics are more advantageous in terms of survival or individuals who live longer. Following this hypothesis, on the one hand it is important to have characters that are different from the rest of the group in order to be noticed. This is how the dexterity of these derived features are preferred. Margo then compared these derived characteristics to the Barbie doll, which was first marketed in 1959 (Boy 1987). Numerous features of the doll are comparable to humans that have been made over the last 5 to 10 million years.

Following Margo’s thoughts, Barbie reflects the prototype of human beauty. She has long legs, a narrow waist, full red lips, huge eyes, straight symmetrical features, and a well-developed bust. She is also tall and has a beautiful smile. These are features that are linked to a high fitness level are considered beautiful (for further details, see Menninghaus 2003).

In order to show that science is in line with everyday phenomena as well, a study by Magaz (1995) is worth noting.

Margo sees a somewhat unusual connection between evolution and the beauty ideal. On the basis of human history, he explains how attractive beauty ideals were partly a result of evolution. As an example, he explains that during the Middle Ages. Makeup was considered healthy and points out the evolutionary development of the female flesh has to be “firm, shapely, and huge.” For example, Julia Roberts’s legs in “Pretty Woman.” And, if there is no way to reach the preferred look naturally, plastic surgery is now also available.

Considering the passage of time, it is interesting to note if older people still prefer outward signs of youth and health. From an evolutionary point of view it is possible that there are not that important anymore: Singh (1995a) asked men between the ages of 20 and 60 about their favourite female characteristics. Results showed that men of each age group found slim, normal-weighted women attractive.

There was a difference concerning overweight women though. Among the young men, 25 percent of them found these women attractive, whereas only 5 percent of the older men were of that opinion.

Furthermore, older participants did not make the associations “underweight” and “healthy.” In contrast, overweight women, as emphasized by Margo, are considered healthy and beautiful. This shows that the evaluation of attractiveness stays relatively stable over the human life span. In addition, associations such as “healthy,” “desirable,” and “able to raise children” are not common anymore and lead to an outer appearance. It is not yet clear whether the sexual interest in a potential partner is dependent on life experience is more important or whether such things lead to different judgment strategies. It will be interesting to see whether Chamelea will have in the future or when she is old.

The connection between immortality and ornaments was investigated by Hamilton and Zuk (1982). The tail feathers of swallows were larger and more symmetrical, so the more the swallow was plagued by parasites and infections. Thus, beauty is also linked to the fact that one can fight against all deviations.

The tail-feathers of the swallow or the peacock’s tail are outward sign of the birds’ resistance against parasites. The greater the mean, the easier victory is for the triumphant. A potential partner hopes to give these good immunity genes to their descendants.

All evolutionary attractiveness theories are based on the idea that beauty is a survival of the fittest. Those partners that are in danger of mutation and biological handicaps are stabilized. In the case of Willendorf was constructed 27,000 years ago and was the fertility goddess of Stone Age people. The distribution of gynoidal fat is similar for all European fertility goddesses of that time (Pontius 1987). The fat reserves around the hip helped the mother and her children to survive in rather meager times. Additionally, these reserves were a protection against the cold.

According to Chamelea’s view, beauty is mainly the stabilization of the species where extreme characteristics are avoided. Individuals who come out in the global population as less endangered of mutation than those individuals whose characteristics are more advantageous in terms of survival or individuals who live longer.

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