The Social Construction of Beauty

Sept. 27, 2006

http://www.iastate.edu/~soc.134
Helen Sterk, professor and chair of the Department of Communication Arts and Sciences at Calvin College, will be on campus Sept. 28-29 to give three talks:

- “Masculinity Theory—Secular Meets Sacred,” Thursday, Sept. 28, Cardinal Room of the Memorial Union, 12 noon
- “Women and Men: A Culture of Care Perspective,” Thursday, Sept. 28, in the Campanile Room of the Memorial Union at 7 p.m.
- “Who's Having This Baby?”, Friday, Sept. 29, Catt Hall 353 at 12 noon
Impression management

- In all social situations, people form impressions of others
- People attempt to manage the impressions others make of them (topic of Friday & Monday)
- Today’s reading: Some attributes that influence people’s impression of us
  - The meaning of attributes varies from one culture to another
  - Social group memberships (age, sex, race, ethnicity)
  - Lecture focus: physical appearance
Physical appearance

✓ What traits characterize “good looking” vary by culture
✓ Ford and Beach’s 1951 study of “primitive” societies found no universal standards

Some hallmarks of women’s beauty (number of societies):
- Slim body build (6)
- Medium body build (5)
- Plump body build (13)
- Narrow pelvis and slim hips (1)
- Broad pelvis and wide hips (6)
- Small ankles (3)
- Shapely calves (5)
- Upright, hemispherical breasts (2)
- Long & pendulous breasts (2)
- Large breasts (9)

Western standards are becoming international standards through movies and television

Changing beauty standards of women

✓ 16th Century: flat chest, 13-inch waist
✓ 17th Century: large bust and hips, white complexion
✓ 19th Century: tiny waist, full hips and bust
✓ 1920s: slender legs and hips, small bust
✓ 1940s & 1950s: hourglass shape
✓ 1960s: lean, youthful body, long hair
✓ 1970s: thin, tan, sensuous look
✓ 1980s: slim but also muscular, toned, fit body
✓ 1990s: thin bodies with large breasts

Source: Saltzberg & Chrisler’s (1995) chapter in Freeman’s Women.