The Social Construction of Beauty

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http://www.iastate.edu/~soc.134

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
✓ Western standards are becoming international standards through movies and television
✓ 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 (8)
  • Small ankles (5)
  • Shapely calves (5)
  • Upright, hemispherical breasts (2)
  • Long & pendulous breasts (2)
  • Large breasts (9)

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

“What is Beautiful is Good”

✓ Research method: people asked to make judgments about people in photographs
✓ People judge beautiful people more sexually responsive, warm, sensitive, kind, interesting, strong, poised, modest, sociable, outgoing, curious, complex, perceptive, confident, assertive and happy
✓ More positive predictions are made about the lives of beautiful people: happier marriages, better jobs
✓ Some negative traits perceived by women about attractive women: more vain, egotistical, materialistic, snobbish, likely to get divorce, likely to cheat on spouse

Source:
Hatfield and Sprecher’s Mirror, Mirror (1986). SUNY Press.
Saltzberg & Chrisler’s (1995) chapter in Freeman’s Women.