The Social Construction of Beauty/Impression Management

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

Beauty is stratified

✓ Women and men have different beauty standards
  • Attractiveness is prerequisite for femininity, not masculinity
  • Female beauty standard requires more time and money to achieve

✓ U.S. beauty standard idealizes Caucasian features and devalues those of other races
  • However, black women have more satisfaction with their bodies than white women

✓ Wealthy can better afford to be beautiful

Source: Saltzberg & Chrisler’s (1995) chapter in Freeman’s Women.
Personal consequences of beauty standards

- Bad first impressions for non-beautiful
- Discrimination in many institutions
- Economic costs
- Time costs
- Medical side effects of achieving beauty
- Dissatisfaction with bodies
- Appearance may play a large role in age discrimination
Everyday interactions as cause of society
Impression management

Impression management: act of presenting a favorable public image of oneself so that others will form positive judgments (p. 176)

- Impression management differs from role to role
- Impression management of myself (who I am), the situation (what is going on) and my team or organization are connected
- When people believe they are failing to give off correct impressions, they attempt to correct the bad impression

Concept developed by Erving Goffman (1922-82)

Goffman used concept of drama as metaphor for social life
Dramaturgical perspective

✓ Dramaturgy: study of social interaction as theater, in which people (“actors”) project images (“play roles”) in front of others (“audience”) (p. 189)

✓ Some elements of performance
  • Front stage: area of social interaction where people perform and work to maintain appropriate impressions (p. 189)
  • Back stage: area of social interaction away from the view of an audience, where people can rehearse and rehash their behavior (p. 189)
  • Props and costumes should be consistent with performance
  • Verbal expression (impressions given) and nonverbal expression (impressions given off) should be consistent with each other
  • Performance team: set of individuals who cooperate in staging a performance that leads an audience to form an impression of one or all team members (p. 195)