

Female Beauty

Evolutionary Psychology's Unfinished Business

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Sociobiology must be viewed as an unproven methodology until it resolves a number of gaps, not the least of which is the nature and mechanism of female beauty.

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Sociobiology postulates that behavior in all species is determined by natural selection, which favors those behaviors that promote biological “fitness” – the ability to survive long enough to produce viable offspring. The establishment of sociobiology in the 1970s led to the creation of a school of thought in the 1990s which, under the slogan “consilience,” has attempted to unify the methods of the natural sciences. Some of these scholars, who term their research “adaptationist,” “Darwinian,” “evolutionary” (as in “evolutionary psychology”) or “selectionist,” believe that their methodology will entirely supplant previous schools of scholarship. It is no exaggeration to say that this view of the animal kingdom – not just of human beings – is currently predominant in the study of behavior.

Partisans of specific disciplines are often all too eager to dwell upon their successes, and proponents of sociobiology are no exception to this general rule. Nevertheless, even they have to admit that the lacunae gape enormous in their methodology. Prominent and even blatantly obvious among them is the lack of a satisfactory explanation for female physical attractiveness.

The lives of young women perceived by society as “beautiful” and “ugly” have very little in common. Even when a woman perceived as unattractive has a moderately better figure and is healthier, more intelligent, more capable of producing offspring, and is a better human being, her opportunities for selecting a mate are still far more limited than those of her attractive counterpart. This appears to make no sense in terms of evolutionary psychology. If sociobiologists cannot resolve so fundamental a question, this school of thought will, at the very least, require a radical reworking and, failing that, will be rejected as invalid or, at the very least, will be judged inadequate.

Studies show that symmetry, sexual dimorphism, and averageness are all found to be attractive across cultures.¹ Supposedly, those faces that are considered attractive are those that reflect the mean of the population, i.e. the average. Still, “beautiful women” are generally found to be exceptional. If beauty is average, why do top models command huge salaries? As for the “beauty-is-symmetry” argument, the importance of beauty as a “symmetry marker” appears to be exaggerated for lack of

other objective criteria. Faces – attractive and unattractive – are usually symmetrical. If one were to photographically reproduce the face of a physically unattractive person, mirroring one side with the other so as to achieve perfect symmetry, that person would still be physically unattractive. A perfectly symmetrical Frankenstein monster would still be a monster. A double but perfectly symmetrical cleft palate would be even worse than a single cleft palate. Conversely, a picture of one side of the face of a physically attractive person is still perceived as attractive and even beautiful, and many advertisements intentionally achieve this effect in displaying only a portion of the face. Photographically hybridize one side of an attractive face with an unattractive face on the other side, and no one will have difficulty choosing which side is beautiful and which is not.

Can it be that feminine beauty is totally explainable in terms of fecundity? Prone to enter into long-term relationships, human males have been preprogrammed by evolution to be attracted most strongly to females who possess the maximum potential for fertility. This means menarche (onset of menstruation) in combination with neoteny (the retention of immature characteristics into adulthood), thus insuring a maximum remaining fertility span. Such an analysis may not be politically correct, but slender, childlike limbs, slight chins, small noses, high-pitched voices, in combination with hormone-swollen buttocks, breasts and lips are the ideal pursued by glossy women's magazines, fashion designers, and plastic surgeons. It's what men want and what women want to be. Mature and young women alike use cosmetics and clothing with the goal of appearing as close to menarche as possible. A *New York Times* fashion journalist notes:

One criticism being leveled at the clothes offered on the runways is that they are skewed too young. The most prevalent trend favors dresses suitable for either anorexic Lolitas or Mia Farrow circa 'Rosemary's Baby.' In either case, a pact with the devil is required. Trying to remain adolescent forever is doomed.... You hit 20, and you start developing a woman's body.²

In a widely publicized case a Brazilian model actually died in December 2006 from complications caused by anorexia. She weighed only 88 pounds (40 kg) and was about 5 feet 8 inches tall (1.72 meters) tall. Doctors consider this weight normal for a 12-year-old girl no more than about 5 feet (1.5 meters) tall.³

But the sought-after look is more than just menarche; it aims at an even more specific target – imitating ovulation. Flushed cheeks, swollen lips, and large eyes set against a backdrop of delicate lace and silk are intended to create an impression of extreme vulnerability. Artificial pheromones – perfume – are added to the recipe to

compensate for man's feeble olfactory senses, not to mention his even more feeble resistance to manipulation.^a

Wishing to enjoy the flattering treatment accorded their older sisters, pre-menarchal girls employ the arts of fashion and cosmetics so as to create the impression that they have already passed through menarche, and "beauty pageants" in which five- and seven-year old girls wear heavy makeup and adult, pointedly "feminine" attire are intended to astonish and titillate by exploiting this neotenus effect. Ultra-thin models on fashion runways represent the same extreme pursuit of neotony – the prepubescent female figure crowned with a pointedly disdainful facial expression that bespeaks not merely sophistication but even satiation to the point of boredom.

Of course, this is at best only a partial answer. Fourteen-year-old girls are not all deemed by society to be equally pretty. Admittedly, perception of female beauty is arbitrarily intertwined with the passing fashions that surround it. The nature/nurture debate serves as an excellent illustration of the broad variability permitted within the framework of genetic imperatives. One study showed that private taste is about as powerful as shared taste.⁴ Still, ancient Greek and Roman statues demonstrate a certain consistency of our concept of female beauty. Even Reubens' fuller female figures are hourglass (a low waist-to-hip ratio) in shape.

Logical as the preceding may seem, its validity is put into question by the existence of homosexuality. Homosexuality represents still another lacuna of sociobiology. (A hypothesis: perhaps it is simply the inevitable statistical tail of a Gaussian [normal] distribution?) Not only should homosexuality not exist, since it, at the very least, subtracts from reproduction, and at most prevents it altogether, it also makes a cult of youth, even though reproduction is irrelevant to the act. And, just as among heterosexuals, pedophile trends are sometimes evident. If the above logic treating female beauty as signal of fecundity is valid, how is it that the removal of this logic produces the identical results?

A second problem is evident in a 2006 study of Chimpanzee sexual behavior, which in theory ought to serve as an analogue to human behavior. Not only did male chimpanzees give no indication of particular susceptibility to youthful females, they

a In contrast, male fashion is oriented to the aesthetic in a much more limited sense, clothing being intended to puff up male shoulders and render the man more imposing – a common practice among any number of species. By wearing expensive clothing the male is able to signal to females his ability to protect them and provide for their future offspring. Architecture – also an art form – fulfills much the same role as male clothing. The lines of the Turkish poem "A Soldier's Prayer" by Ziya Gökalp (1876- 1924) are illustrative:

*The minarets are bayonets,
the domes helmets,
the mosques our barracks,
the believers our soldiers.*

even preferred older females.⁵ *The New York Times* reports that there is even a “niche” market in pornographic films featuring women in their fifties, favored by men in their twenties. (Still another “statistical tail”?) One hypothesis is that chimpanzees are more oriented toward short-term relations than are humans, and thus long-term fertility is not of significance. Nevertheless, as the authors concede, the discrepancy between majority human and chimpanzee sexual preferences has yet to be convincingly explained – by proponents of sociobiology or by anyone else, for that matter.

Women’s fashions are certainly an art form, and they should be readily explainable within the framework of behaviorist and Darwinian psychological analysis. Intended to protect the wearer from cold and injury, clothing was originally strictly utilitarian in nature. Later, dress came to be used to identify the individual as a member of a specific community and to emphasize his or her sexual identity and status within that society. Sonya Marmeladova in Dostoevsky’s *Crime and Punishment* is a prostitute and dresses in a fashion intended to signal her intentions. This may have been Russia, but it was nevertheless a Victorian epoch. How did a Russian prostitute in the second half of the nineteenth century signal to her clients? Or, for that matter, how about Carthage or Peking?

Female clothing and support garments replicate the shapes of a youthful (*i.e.* fecund) figure, and sexually distinctive parts of the body are not only emphasized, but partially exposed. All this conforms perfectly to behaviorist theory. The goal-gradient hypothesis, originally proposed by Clark Hull in 1932, states that the tendency to approach a goal increases with proximity to the goal.⁶ (When Hull tested his “hypothesis,” he found that rats in an alley ran progressively faster as they proceeded from the starting box to the food.)

A quite different strategy is pursued in traditional Islamic societies. A conservative Muslim woman dressed entirely in black is attired like many a Christian nun who sees herself as a “bride of Christ.” Some married Hasidic women even shave their heads. When all is said and done, Conservative Jewry, Christianity, and Islam are actually closer to each other in both worldview and style than to their liberal co-religionists.

Having greater access than men to sexual opportunities, women have long practiced limiting supply. Thus, they are less inclined than men to engage in frank descriptions of the sexual act and more likely to decry depictions of nude bodies as “pornography.” By limiting access to sex, they are better able to coerce men into monogamy – a practice which runs radically counter to male biological urges. Thus, many Islamic women voluntarily – even enthusiastically – wear the *hajeeb*. For their part, men encourage traditional female dress codes for fear that their females may be impregnated by other males.

Still, even though clothing can perform such utilitarian functions as providing shelter and enhancing sexual attractiveness, these are functions essentially extraneous to artistic essence. The Russian Formalist critic Viktor Shklovsky once noted that, while samovars could be used instead of hammers to drive nails, this was not their intended purpose, nor was it the most productive way to employ them. In discussing human female beauty in terms of evolutionary psychology, can it be that we are analyzing the functional qualities of a samovar to drive nails? Frankly, we are still at a loss to explain one of the most powerful drivers of human behavior. To paraphrase a popular song, “What has beauty got to do with it?”

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