



# Beauty is in the eye of the beholder?

Intuitively then, so too is ugliness. At a fundamental level, the idea that someone can perceive another person as ugly based on their own psychological processing is an interesting one in that it adds an inherent ambiguity to social judgements. Social judgements are assessments, conscious or subconscious, that we make of our surrounds and our peers. In particular they guide social interactions with other people in a social environment that enforces expectations upon us that are relatively well-defined. However the socially accepted notion of attractiveness stands in contract with the reality of what are effectively subjective aesthetic evaluations. So let us consider the dynamics of these social judgements and why they persist in the face of intuitive ambiguity that differences between individuals create.

## 1. WHAT IS BEAUTY?

Upon embarking on a quest to define beauty with a practical example, I happened to stumble across the June 2009 edition of *Ralph Magazine* that a considerate housemate had read and left for me in the bathroom. Surely a cultural icon that promotes beauty as the basis for its primary commercial appeal would be an ideal reference point. Australia's Sexiest Woman 2009, Emily Scott, stares longingly from the cover as she overshadows five Victoria's Secret models (or 'underwear overachievers' as it reads here) and their whiter-than-white bikinis. What is of immediate note is that the term 'beauty' is a socially female attribute which will bear significance later when we consider the specific details of how these social concepts are established.

Armed with this artillery of talented case examples, I now ask (perhaps naively, although necessarily): what is it that allows these exemplars to wear the title of the world's most beautiful women? Common factors influencing this judgement may include perceived height-to-weight ratios, bust size, skin tone, waist girth and the relative skill of digital editor of the magazine. Needless to say, these women are very attractive because they rate very highly on the dimensions that determine 'beauty'.

There are, however, a number of issues to be considered here. Firstly, if all six of these women score highly on the scales of perceived height-to-weight ratios, bust size, skin tone and waist girth, then it would be fair to assert that they all share a very similar physical appearance. Add to this the fact that all but three of the twelve magazine editorial staff are male and what you now have is an apparently definitive social exclamation of beauty (Australia's 'sexiest'

woman poll) that is defined by an all-male panel and represented by morphologically identical women.

### The problem with beauty

The problem that this presents is that arriving at a satisfactory judgement on another individual's beauty is a far more complicated process than ticking boxes beside photo-shopped bikini models. Compare meeting six people face-to-face (i.e. in a naturally social situation) with viewing a series of pictures on a screen and putting them in order from most beautiful to least beautiful. Any psycho-social analyst could tell you that the problem is not that there are lots of *other* influences, but that these influences all have different effects on each other. In real social situations you are dealing with an onslaught of primary sensory information (sight, smell, taste, hearing and touch). It has been shown that these senses can have interesting effects on each other, known as multimodal interactions. For an effective demonstration, search 'McGurk effect' on the internet. The McGurk effect involves watching a short video initially with open eyes and again with closed eyes. What the listener hears changes depending on the visual input (eyes open or closed) that is being received at the same time as the auditory information. This suggests that decisions you may base on the physical appearance of another person can be easily influenced by an array of other sensory sources.

Sensory pathways in the brain are, however, considered rather primal sources of information. During any given social interaction you also engage a number of complex higher-order processes which are largely defined by the individual's personality and social experience.

These may include perceived humour, emotional responses, perceived emotional responses, implicit and explicit evaluations of adaptive mating suitability, not to mention how you perceive the other person to be placing expectations upon you during the period of interaction – the sum of which ultimately determines how you judge others.

It is possible that all of these criteria may be balanced and weighed up against each other to form the basis of an instinctual assessment in the first ten seconds of conversation<sup>1</sup> which only lends itself to the following conclusion. Socially defined exemplars of beauty belong to social groupings (called schema) which are inappropriately narrow because these schema are defined by a non-representative group of society (i.e. all males) and represented by a morphologically homogenous group that does not reflect the natural variation in physical morphology (i.e. swimwear models).

## 2. IS UGLINESS THE NECESSARY COMPLEMENT OF BEAUTY?

With this in mind, how can we define ugliness? Socially, there is a degree of emphasis on beauty simply because it is a profitable attribute, but is ugliness the necessary complement to beauty? And, more importantly, are the social dimensions that define the ugliness schema reciprocally narrow and non-representative?

Firstly, it should be clear that to classify everything that is not beautiful as ugly would be an offence parallel to claiming victory in 'the most beautiful woman competition'. Secondly, humans have a natural preference for positive attributes – that is to say that we have a preference for rating how beautiful someone is rather than how ugly they are – therefore the social schema that defines ugliness is far more ambiguous. Thus it is much harder to define someone as ugly based on the narrow dimensions of socially perceived beauty.

It is misleading to say that any scale which lies on a continuum has a complementary, or

opposite scale unless they are polar opposites of the same concept. If I was to take the 'beauty scale', reverse it and call it the 'ugliness scale', I would essentially have the same scale, influenced by the same factors and would produce the exact same information, albeit by a different name. Ugliness, just like beauty, is a continuum-based scale that, in order to be an honest reflection of reality, cannot lend itself to absolute evaluations. While ugliness and beauty

are closely related as positive and negative relatives of the same social concept (attractiveness), they are equally informed by independent sources.

In effect, ugliness is a unique social construct that is related to beauty because it shares a number of similar

influencing factors, but is also influenced by independent social information. However, the essential element of both concepts is that in a social context, they are defined as physical measures of attractiveness. As we have seen, the complex processes that *actually* influence these judgements in *real* situations are by no means limited to physical dimensions.

### Is attractiveness necessarily a physical scale?

So, you might ask, what are the factors that determine relative ugliness or beauty? The answer truly depends on how synchronised with social pressures you are. We have seen that socially-determined evaluations of beauty essentially rely on physical dimensions and appearance. We have also seen that these judgements are inherently narrow and non-representative. From the outset I have maintained that the reality of social interactions is one of ambiguous and subjective assessment. So then, why should any social judgement be restricted to a single scale that does not allow room for the input of complex, interacting psycho-social factors? In some cases there may be confusion between a physical response – attraction (as in I am attracted to, or I feel attracted to someone) and deciding if someone is attractive – attractiveness (he or she is a very attractive person). These are separate processes that guide social judgements. Logically, there must be some evaluation of attractiveness (which is influenced by a range of psycho-social factors) prior to acknowledging that there is an

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<sup>1</sup> See *Blink* by Malcolm Gladwell for an interesting discussion of the significance of first impressions and how they guide the subsequent interactions we engage in.

attraction (which is a physical response that is determined by chemical changes in the brain that produce a range of physical symptoms) between two people.

### 3. RETHINKING SOCIAL DYNAMICS AND RELATIONSHIPS

Because social interactions involve much more than just a series of physical experiences, it is worth entertaining the possible influences that are at play. The emphasis being that socially determined ideals of attractiveness are physically informed, while in practice, such a dependence on physical dimensions (height, weight, waist size etc) is not only misrepresentative but contrary to the principles of *social* engagement as a means of meeting other people rather than other bodies.

#### The blind case – re-evaluating our dependence on visual input

Consider for a moment what your day would be like if you woke up tomorrow and had no functional use of your visual system. How would this change the way you shower, prepare food, get dressed for work, get to work, complete your job, go out with friends and talk to everyone you meet throughout the day? Visual input is by far the most immediate and explicit source of information for the brain. Light travels faster than any other sensory modality and the assessments that we are hardwired to make of our surrounds on an ongoing basis are often based primarily on this information.

While this is an adaptive mechanism, what influence does this have on us as social beings? How would your interpersonal dynamics change if you could never see the person you were talking to? Suddenly sub-vocal communication becomes redundant and the idea of beauty being in the 'eye' of the beholder takes on a certain sense of irony.

Easily the most appropriate engagement with others would occur via auditory interactions – that is by speaking to others (isn't this what people are supposed to do when they meet each other before they decide if they like each other?). Suddenly you would find yourself in the absence of the social input that you had previously relied on (i.e. visual input) and now in a position where the all your social assessments of others are based on alternative criteria. This shift in reliance on social input is a critical one because it highlights that there is an innate tendency to rely on visual characteristics when making social assessments of others – and hence a dominant misrepresentation of social concepts such as beauty – but also that there are alternative and

no less significant factors that influence these judgements.

Further to this is the underlying issue of the full spectrum of social influences that determine your individual perceptions of beauty or ugliness. A true assessment of attraction is determined by far more than simply what can be seen. In many senses the physical element of attraction does not fulfill its full potential until a reciprocal attraction between two individuals has been established and the setting for the interaction is no longer a social one that involves other people. Hopefully.

On an individual level, personal assessments of others are so closely linked to the individual that no one checklist bears any meaningful function. However, with an increased awareness of the full range of processes at play during these social interactions, the individual's control and intention can come into effect. Though perhaps what is more important is that the limited perspective of social measures of attractiveness be acknowledged by those who reinforce the self-esteem of the socially vulnerable. Beauty and ugliness are powerful concepts in social contexts yet they are ultimately meaningless when not determined by the processes that occur within the individual – which would be to say that beauty actually lies in the subconscious psycho-social workings of the beholder – and not in men's magazines and digital editing.



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