What Is Beauty, and Why Do We Care So Much About It?

Recently, I saw a patient in consultation who exclaimed, “Doctor, please help me! Everyone is staring at this horrible mark on my face; it’s destroying me; everyone sees it.” She looked at me as if I could easily see her damaging mark. I could not help noticing the large, 3-inch-long jagged scar running vertically along her right cheek, but, not inadvertently wanting to make an issue of something that was not, I asked her, “Which mark are you referring to?” She then surprised me and pointed to a tiny pinpoint red spider vein on the left side of her forehead and said, “The red blemish; can’t you see it? It makes me look so ugly, and it’s driving me crazy.” She was not at all concerned with the rather large scar carved into her cheek; it had been caused by an injury when she was 2 years old, and she had adapted to it. She was concerned only with the new red blemish. The obvious cheek scar had no effect on her perception of her own beauty.

The definition of beauty has been debated for thousands of years and by many of the most innovative thinkers. The ancient Greek poet Sappho (born in the 7th century BCE) stated, “What is beautiful is good.”1 A century later, Plato,2 along the same vein, postulated that what is good and true is beautiful. Immanuel Kant,3 the 18th century philosopher, believed beauty is that which captures our interest for no other reason than it is beautiful.4 The better a person feels, the more likely he or she is to project a positive and attractive impression. A smile has more impact in projecting a positive first impression than cosmetic treatments or clothing.5 All the societal advantages bestowed on the beautiful have value only as far as one feels beautiful. The bottom line is: if you think you are beautiful, you are. However, the key is to feel beautiful, and how is that done?

If you look at beauty from a Darwinian perspective, its definition and value to both nature and evolution is clear. For most of us, beauty is visceral, meaning it hits deep down in our gut, eliciting emotions, feelings, and actions formulated in the most primitive corners of our consciousness. We know beauty when we see it, but it can be difficult to describe. And while to some extent beauty is an individual realm, it has a more utilitarian value in assuring the survival of our species. According to evolutionary biologists, beauty is the mechanism that helps us choose the ideal mate and ensure our genes make it into the next generation.6

In nature, symmetry is beauty, and the more symmetric a figure is, the more likely it is to procreate and survive. Female peahens and barn swallows prefer to mate with males that possess longer, more symmetric tails.7 It takes energy and natural resources for a body to create a beautiful exterior, and animals that are burdened with illness need to spend internal resources to fight off disease and cannot afford to devote energy to creating a beautiful symmetric or colorful exterior.

Does the same apply to humans? Well, to some extent, yes. Like it or not, in evolutionary human biology, appearance matters. Overwhelming scientific evidence shows that humans with more symmetric features are likely to be considered more genetically fit and beautiful.8 The beautiful are likely to receive more favorable judgment and treatment throughout their lives.9 The beautiful are more likely to get better grades in school, to be hired for a job, and to receive higher salaries.10 The drive to be beautiful is innate because nature stamps the more symmetric and youthful appearing as a beautiful individual, disease free, genetically fit, and fertile.

Female sexual traits that pique the subconscious male mind include prominent lips, thick hair, light-colored skin, and a waist size measuring 60% to 80% of the hip size.11 All of these findings are registered by the subconscious mind as signs of youth and fertility, but we simply know them as signs of beauty.

And what primitive desires do women harbor for males? The idealized male is expected to acquire, and defend, a family. A female is more likely to desire a male who possesses the physical characteristics that identify him as resourceful. A large chest, thin midsection, jutting chin, wide jaw, and strong nasal profile are repre-
sentative of strength and the ability to provide. Not surprisingly, this also correlates with high levels of the male hormone, testosterone. It is no coincidence that cartoon superheroes—e.g., Superman, Batman, and Spiderman—all seem to have bodily features associated with galactic levels of testosterone. We like our male leaders to appear tall, strong, and masculine. At the famed United States Military Academy at West Point, the future rank of a male cadet can be predicted during his freshman year based on his facial appearance alone. Physical characteristic signs of male strength show prominently in our elected officials. Facial appearance may affect the likelihood of gaining a seat in Congress. The (male) presidential candidate with the more prominent chin, wider jaw, and fuller head of hair may be more likely to win as well.

However, as humans evolve into a civil society in which strength is not the only indicator of resourcefulness, the ability to provide financially is beginning to replace brawn as being attractive. In a large study of over 38 cultures from Australia to Zambia, women from 37 of them placed great value on financial and political prospect. Physical traits are not the only indicators of thriving in nature. Other factors, such as humor, artistic ability, conversation, and musical production, serve as indicators of intelligence and are weighing more on the scale of traits indicating genetic fitness and health for both men and women. While the field of evolutionary psychology is vast and deep, efforts by social scientists to better understand human adaptation to the stresses of a modern society are reporting relevant findings correlating our actions to appearance and well-being. We have known for some time now that a bad diet and poor lifestyle decisions greatly affect health, but increasingly there is evidence that these same choices have an impact on how we look and feel. Smoking, excessive sun exposure, and foods high in simple sugars lead not only to inflammation, cardiac disease, and diabetes mellitus but also to deleterious changes in appearance and quality of life. However, exercise, sleep, stress reduction, and nutritional supplements can improve appearance, reducing wrinkles, making us look younger, while at the same time enhancing how we feel.

Conventional wisdom likes to paint the field of plastic surgery as the purveyors of beauty for the vanity-challenged. This could not be further from the truth. While we do possess the tools, knowledge, and skills to craft the ideal facial proportions and angles, that is not our goal. There is no benefit to being beautiful if you do not feel beautiful. The focus of facial plastic surgery is to use modern medicine, skilful communication, and aesthetic ideals to improve the quality of lives. As science corroborates, a healthy self-esteem is translated into beauty. Plastic surgical research is designing studies that help one to feel better, resulting in increased confidence in appearance. Recent trials have proven that those who undergo cosmetic medical treatments experience a better quality of life and self-esteem. In addition, those undergoing cosmetic surgery make a better first impression and also feel more confident and productive at work.

By fusing the past intellects with modern science, we can precisely deliver on improving the appearance, quality of life, and self-esteem of each individual patient. As surgeons, the more we understand and appreciate the relationship between our patients’ desires and these innate biological tendencies, the better we serve our patients. Ultimately, to be beautiful is to feel beautiful.

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Financial Disclosure: None reported.