

## Book Review

### Is Research on Beauty Only Skin Deep? Review of *The Psychology of Physical Attraction*

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*The Psychology of Physical Attraction*, by Viren Swami and Adrian Furnham. New York: Routledge, 2008. 222 pp., ISBN 978-0-415-42251-2. \$24.95, paperback.

PHILOSOPHERS AND ARTISTS have debated beauty for centuries; only in recent decades have psychologists and other scientists ventured into these waters. Swami, an evolutionary and social psychologist, and Furnham, an organizational and applied psychologist, chronicle this foray by psychological researchers, but also weave examples, pictures, and stories from other cultures into their book. This broader approach to discussing research on attraction, including copious pictures of beauty in art and real life (from the portly Rubens women to Marilyn Monroe) and quotations by authors such as Keats and Shakespeare, will appeal to psychologists, students, and lay people alike. They begin by discussing Pythagoras's golden ratios (borrowed by Da Vinci in his *Vitruvian Man* drawing) that attempted to find universal proportions to explain beauty everywhere, including in architecture and the human form. Ever since, people have debated what is beautiful in the human face and body, particularly whether standards

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of beauty are universal, as championed by many evolutionary psychologists, or culturally relative.

The authors review core propositions of evolutionary psychology before diving into the specifics of beauty research. The central thrust of the evolutionary approach is the “good genes” hypothesis, which posits that the characteristics to which people are attracted signal good health, particularly good reproductive health (e.g., fertility). The authors cover lesser known and more controversial evolutionary arguments such as the notion of “runaway sexual selection,” which was proposed in an attempt to explain certain characteristics used to attract mates, which appear to be costly both in terms of energy expended and increased exposure to predators (e.g., male peacock plumes). An initial preference by one sex may yield a positive feedback loop over generations, leading to exaggerated displays by the other sex. Some researchers have suggested that male preference for larger breasts in women is an example of runaway sexual selection, because breasts signal the attainment of reproductive age, though Swami and Furnham’s review suggests that there is not a clear male preference for large breasts.

The authors review a dizzying array of characteristics, from hair length to leg-to-body ratio to foot size. Some of these characteristics show relatively universal preferences (e.g., men tend to prefer women of average height, whereas women tend to prefer tall men); other characteristics have varied substantially across cultures and eras (e.g., beards have variously signified status, dirtiness, or monk-like chastity). However, the authors properly focus primarily on face and body. Direct comparisons of effect sizes suggest that the face, the most information-rich part of the body, is the most important attribute for determining attraction, followed by body shape and size. According to Swami and Furnham, however, our current understanding of what is attractive in faces and body shapes is not as clear-cut as we would like to believe.

Fluctuating asymmetry, or deviations from bilateral symmetry (particularly in the face), has received a great deal of attention. According to the good genes argument, deviations from asymmetry are the result of deleterious environmental stressors (e.g., poor nutrition, disease), so symmetry signals good health. However, the authors point out that greater symmetry has not always been associated with higher attractiveness ratings and that there may be a possible natural confounding between symmetry and other attractive characteristics (e.g., jaw size). Babyish faces, more feminine features, and face averageness (the latter not reviewed in the book; see Weeden & Sabini, 2005) are associated with higher ratings of attractiveness for women, but the correlations with measures of health are small or absent.

Researchers of body shape initially concentrated on the waist-to-hip ratio (WHR) and proposed that a ratio of about .7 for women, representing a classic hourglass figure, is the most attractive to men (Singh, 1993). Lower WHR in women appears to be associated with circulating estrogen, which deposits fat cells in the hip region and inhibits fat placement around the waist. However, more

recent research that independently varied WHR and weight (much of it conducted by Swami and Furnham themselves, e.g., Swami, Caprario, Tovee, & Furnham, 2006) found that, compared with WHR, weight at the lower end of the normal range, as assessed by body mass index (BMI), is a more potent indicator of attractiveness as well as reproductive health, at least in Western cultures. For men, broad chest and shoulders and a narrow waist, as assessed by the waist-to-chest ratio (WCR), account for sizeable variance in body attraction ratings. Although this body shape in men actually is associated with poorer health, some have speculated that men with relatively muscular physiques may have intimidated or battered rivals or been better hunters.

Swami and Furnham conclude that “the available evidence would seem to go against such ancestrally constrained theories of physical attractiveness” (p. 110). They propose that more general evolved mechanisms govern attractiveness judgments, such as looking for health and status, specific markers of which vary from culture to culture. They cite research showing that men who are hungry or who feel less financially satisfied demonstrate a preference for heavier women (Nelson, Pettijohn, & Galak, 2007). These temporary changes may mirror cultural differences, such as the preference for heavier women by individuals of lower socioeconomic status and members of hunter-gatherer tribes (e.g., the Hadza in Tanzania). In resource-poor environments, heavier women may be associated with health (e.g., resistance to disease), status, and reproductive success. In more affluent environments, heavier women may be associated with health risks (e.g., coronary disease, diabetes risk) and lower status. This interactionist perspective is consistent with work by Gangestad and Kaplan (2005), who emphasized trade-offs, including sacrificing health to some extent, in attracting mates, and with Pettijohn and Tesser’s (1999) work finding that threatening conditions lead individuals to favor more mature characteristics (e.g., smaller eyes).

The end of the book is rather disappointing. The final chapter, “What Future for Physical Attraction Research?,” does not map out a plan for future research. Rather, it rails against “the fashion-beauty complex” and its “transnational corporations” (p. 164). To be sure, the authors rightly chronicle the biases involved with attractiveness (particularly in legal and employment domains) and the undue focus on attractiveness that has contributed to rises in bodily dissatisfaction and eating disorders. Nevertheless, the authors do not present specific ideas for future research. For example, a series of meta-analyses (see Foster, Witcher, Campbell, & Green, 1998) could identify (a) which attributes significantly influence attraction and make meaningful effect-size estimates and (b) which attributes are linked to measures of reproductive health and reproductive success.

New technologies may help address previous research limitations and increase ecological validity. It is time to move beyond static line drawings. For example, technologies such as motion capture animation (used in the film *Beowulf*, which presented a realistic and beautiful animated version of Angelina Jolie, the reptilian tail notwithstanding) can present realistic figures from

various perspectives and in motion and yet also systematically vary characteristics of interest to test competing theories and assess relative effect sizes. Attraction research should also move beyond mere ratings of attractiveness and investigate the role of physical attractiveness in the development, maintenance, and even termination of longer-term relationships. New approaches such as online dating services and speed dating paradigms (e.g., Eastwick & Finkel, 2008) may link these formerly disparate literatures.

Ultimately, Swami and Furnham point out, attraction researchers must “put humpty dumpty back together” (p. 58). (There is no record of Humpty marrying or having offspring, which is consistent with his poor WCR and BMI.) In the end, individuals look for a quality mate, not a particular hair length or WHR. Although this book occasionally gets lost in the maze of reviewing isolated characteristics at the expense of the big picture, it is an appealing and thorough review of the extensive research on physical attractiveness. Psychology’s current understanding of beauty is more than skin deep, but it could go deeper.

#### AUTHOR NOTE

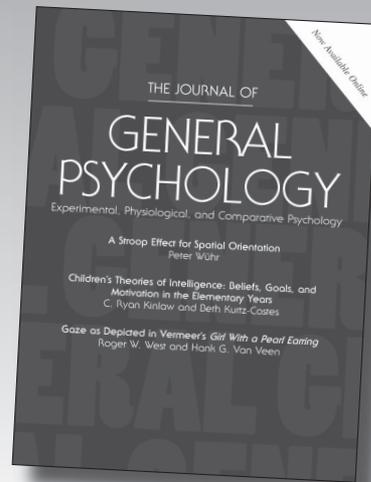
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