Intercultural Differences

Many studies support the opinion that there is only one universal beauty ideal that exists and is independent of cultural background. Studies from Jones for example (1995; Jones & Hill 1995) postulated that neotinous features, such as a childlike face with a small nose, huge eyes and full lips, are preferred by Americans in the US, people from Brazil, Russia, and Indians in Venezuela and Paraguay. Furnham, McClelland and Omer (2005) came to the conclusion that people from Kenya and Britain perceive the same female figure as attractive.

Deviations from this result were found by Marlowe and Wetsman (Marlowe & Wetsman 2001; 1999). They conducted an experiment in a hunter-gatherer society whose members were not touched by Western civilization. They asked Hadza who live in Tanzania to rank the drawings of women that had already been used as stimulus material in previous studies (Singh, 1995, 1994). The figures varied in weight (underweight, normal, overweight) and waist-to-hip ratio (WHR), from 0.7 to 0.9. In Western cultures, a normal body weight with a WHR of 0.7 is usually preferred. Contrary to these results, the Hadza found heavy women more attractive than normal women, and thought that underweight women looked rather sick. So Chamelea as a Hadza woman would have to gain weight and her WHR should be higher than 0.7.

Yu and Shepard conducted a similar experiment (Yu & Shepard 1998) in Peru. They questioned Matsingenska men (Yomy-bata) who live in Mama Park, which is restricted to all but scientific and official visitors. There, women were judged according to their weight, with overweight women considered as being more attractive, healthy and desirable. Additionally, a population that lives outside of the park (Shi-riats), but that is still not really touched by Western civilization, was also asked to judge the photos. This group also preferred overweight women and found them to be healthier. However, women with a lower WHR were judged to be more attractive and were chosen as potential mates.

The last group of men who were questioned belonged to an ethnically mixed group (Alto Madre) that lives along the Alto Madre River, which is a major trading route. Thus, these people have more contact to other populations. The results here did not differ significantly from the US population. They grouped female figures by WHR and then by weight. Taken all together, the judgments become more like those of the US population in places where it was clear that there was a stronger Western influence. Following the arguments of Marlowe and Wetsman, the WHR is of interest in those cultures that have enough food. Poorer populations and those far from Western influence look at weight as an indicator of fertility. In these populations, the danger of starvation is greater, thus a well-fed woman is more desirable than a skinny one.

Preview

So far, this series on “The Psychology of Aesthetics” has dealt with the term “aesthetics,” and illuminated the features that are perceived as beautiful and given explanations as to why this is so. Deviations from the norm have also been discussed in this article.

This leaves the question of the consequences of beauty and attractiveness on everyday life. Does a person’s outer appearance influence how he or she lives together with other humans? Is beauty advantageous or disadvantageous? Does the saying “what is beautiful is good” reflect the truth? Or are there any studies that can contradict this statement? Examples to answer these questions will be the subject of the final article in the series. We will see if we can convince Chamelea or another person to test the effects of her physical appearance. So for now we allow her to have some time to relax and take care of her intrinsic values and not just her outer qualities.