Draw an Ugly Man: An Inquiry into the Dimensions of Physical Attractiveness

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The literature of social and developmental psychology contains a number of studies which show, perhaps not surprisingly, that physically attractive persons are rated more positively in a variety of areas (intelligence, likeableness, achievement, etc.) than less attractive persons. In general, these studies have made use of drawings and photographs of people that have been scaled by a panel of judges to determine physical attractiveness. Although this research confirms that there is considerable agreement between judges, and between judges and subjects, as to what constitutes physical attractiveness, (e.g., Cavior & Lombardi, 1971; Cross & Cross, 1971; Byrne, London, & Reeves, 1968) there has been no attempt to specify the dimensions of physical attractiveness precisely.

One of the items on the 1937 edition of the Stanford-Binet Intelligence Scale (Form L-M) asks the child to look at two line drawings and indicate which woman is the pretty one and which the ugly one. The pretty face has fine, delicate features and a neatly coiffed hairdo (circa 1935) while the ugly face has a large nose, a large mouth, and unkempt hair.

Several interesting questions arise. Are there uniform cultural conceptions of physical beauty? If so, are they the same today as they were a generation or so ago? Are our cultural conceptions common to most race and ethnic groups? That is, do blacks and whites hold a common conception of what constitutes physical attractiveness? In the Stanford-Binet materials described above, both drawings are of white women. Nevertheless, the features of the ugly woman are distinctly more negroid than those of the pretty woman. It would not be surprising to learn that blacks hold a different standard of physical attractiveness, than whites. Nevertheless, a cursory review of the facial features of attractive blacks, (e.g., the handsome black male and beautiful black female stars of television and motion pictures) suggests that blacks and whites may fit a common cultural conception of physical attractiveness, i.e., pretty blacks and whites may differ in skin color and hair style, but are often similar in the structure of basic facial features.

With these questions in mind, two investigations were initiated. Both involved collecting drawings of pretty and ugly men and women from university students, both black and white.

The subjects were 25 white introductory psychology students, 25 black students enrolled in a seminar in black psychology, and 9 black students from a predominately black remedial English class. The subjects participated in the experiment during their regular class periods. They were given prepared forms and asked to sketch a face of a "good looking" and an "ugly" male and female in full-face view within 2x2 inch square spaces provided on the sheets. The subjects were asked to list several characteristics about each face that contributed to its relative attractiveness. Instructions to the subjects emphasized that the experiment was concerned only with physical attractiveness, and discouraged them from including personality and emotional characteristics

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in their drawings (e.g., smiles, scowls, etc.) and from drawing young people as good looking and old people as ugly.

A number of measurements of the facial characteristics of each sketch were made and analyzed in a 2 within factor (sex and beauty of drawing) x one between factor (subject group) analysis of variance. Such things as length and breadth of face, the absolute and proportional size of the nose and mouth, the distance between the eyes, and the chin length were included in the analysis. In general, "ugly" faces were shorter ($p < .003$) and had significantly more distance between the eyes ($p < .002$) than the good looking faces. In the analysis comparing whites to the black English class, the proportional nose width was significantly larger for both races ($p < .05$). However, a significant sex x beauty interaction revealed that the effect of nose width on beauty was much stronger in the female drawings. A significantly ($p < .008$) longer nose was also drawn in the "ugly" pictures.

There was a tendency for the black English subjects to draw broader features on the unattractive figures, for example, while the proportional mouth width was generally greater in the "ugly" drawing, a race x beauty interaction revealed that the blacks drew the "ugly: much larger than the "pretty" while the whites actually drew the "pretty" slightly larger than the "ugly".

The first study tended to support original predictions; however, there were some methodological problems. There was a general reluctance on the part of all subjects to draw the required faces. In part, this reflected their reservations concerning their drawing ability and, in part, a reluctance to draw "ugly" faces. This attitude was more pronounced among the black subjects. The general quality of the drawings was poor. In spite of instructions to draw faces about 2 inches high, the actual drawings varied widely in absolute size. In addition, there was a surprising tendency for the black seminar subjects to draw black faces as "good looking", and white faces as "ugly". This tendency was noted to a lesser degree among subjects in the black English class. Whether this reflected a racial bias or a tendency not to take the task seriously is not known.

A second study was conducted similar to the first, with methodological improvements to avoid some of the problems of the first study. The subjects were 17 black and 50 white introductory psychology students. They participated in small groups of 3 to 5 subjects at a time. The black data were collected by a black experimenter and white data by a white experimenter. The subjects were asked to draw both full-face and profile views of a pretty and ugly woman and handsome and ugly man. Outlines of the full-face view and the back of the head of the profile view were pre-sketched on the forms. Subjects were asked to sketch faces of males and females of the same age and race as themselves, and to provide reasons as in the first study.

The general tendency for both blacks and whites to draw larger and broader features on the "ugly" faces, as found in Experiment I, was obtained again at even higher levels of statistical significance in this second study. The quality of the drawings and evidence

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seriousness with which the subjects approached the task were greatly improved. The reluctance to draw "ugly" faces and to provide reasons why a face was ugly was also evident in the study, particularly among the black subjects. Nevertheless, in addition to their drawings, about half of the black subjects also provided some written indication of what made their ugly faces ugly; of these, about 80% noted either big mouth or lips, or big nose as a reason for a face being ugly. These same results were as evident among the white subjects as well. Thus, both studies suggest that blacks and whites share a common cultural conception of beauty, in which the broader features are judged less attractive. To the extent that this is the case, it would seem to carry some serious implications for general personality and self-concept development of blacks. Regardless of "Black is Beautiful", the present results suggest that there is a prevailing belief in our society that the black individual is more beautiful when he has "white" features.

References

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