



LOOKS

Why They Matter More Than You Ever Imagined

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I N T R O D U C T I O N

Looks, Lookism, and the Media



*Far more than meets the eye
and far deeper than skin deep*

She was a former NFL cheerleader with silken hair the color of wild honey, tanned, with flawless skin, a smile from a toothpaste ad, and a head-turning figure that was all original equipment.

With such looks, Melana Scantlin had no difficulty attracting men. But she didn't want just *anybody*. She wanted a special man, one she could start a family with one day, a princely fellow with whom she could spend the rest of her life.

But suddenly she was twenty-six and it wasn't happening. Then Melana, an aspiring actress, was invited to join a kind of video dating service, a unique program designed not only to help find her mate but also to entertain a vast television audience.

As cameras rolled, Melana was introduced to sixteen young men. They were muscular, they were skinny, they were chubby. Some were clean-shaven, others bearded; they wore buzz cuts, fashionable hairstyles, or were balding. They were tall, short, and in between. Line up all sixteen and they were pretty much what you might expect to find at a typical American high school's ten-year class reunion.

According to rules that Melana agreed to, she was obliged to date each man at least once. Immediately she saw that the group included several men in whom she had no interest; in short order, they were gone from the program and from her life. Concentrating on the others, she went on dates or hung out with one or another, getting to know each, learning a bit about their lives, their personalities, their private priorities.

All these men were dubbed "Average Joes," with unremarkable physical attributes, diverse but ordinary occupations, and unexceptional lives. Steadily winnowing the group after a few weeks, Melana

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finally chose toothy, twenty-eight-year-old Adam Mesh, a husky securities trader with a strong New York accent.

Melana said she was sure that she had found her true love—until the show's producers threw her a curve. Suddenly, three young men with looks that would have shamed a Greek god were added to the mix. Would Melana prefer any of them to Adam?

With little hesitation, she left her "true love" for Jason Peoples, twenty-seven, a part-time waiter still living with his parents.

"The eyes, the face, the smile. How could you deny that?" said Melana as she and her Adonis flew off for a honeymoon-like vacation at an exclusive resort.

When this lovely woman abruptly rejected a successful trader who had been the subject of a *Fortune* magazine article to party with a gorgeous slacker, millions of American women, vicariously living Melana's romance, rejoiced. Older and wiser, they might not

have chosen the ambition-challenged Jason over one of Wall Street's rising stars—but still, they could appreciate why she had.

That's because for a long time Americans, like people of most other cultures, have allowed what they *see* of a person to strongly influence what they *feel* and *believe* about that person. Almost from the moment of birth, each of us is judged—silently, unconsciously, and nearly instantly—on the basis of our height (or lack of it), our weight and bulk, the shape and symmetry of our facial features, the length and style of our hair, our mode of dress, our grooming—everything that goes into the mix of qualities known as “physical attractiveness.”

Sometimes termed “*lookism*”—treating people in ways biased by their perceived individual level of physical attractiveness—the “physical attractiveness (PA)” phenomenon has been studied in depth for decades by social scientists of many disciplines, including psychologists, sociologists, biologists, and anthropologists. They have produced a panoply of sometimes-contradictory research data. But while this subject continues to be studied, a fair appraisal of science's collective conclusion is that in America, more than in most Western cultures, what you look like—or more important, how others perceive you—shapes your life in dozens of often subtle ways from cradle to grave.

As you will see in following chapters, PA affects the way nurses treat newborns in the same way that it shapes the manner in which parents act and react with their children. PA influences a child's self-image and becomes a significant factor in how teachers evaluate, assist, and grade pupils from kindergarten to graduate school. It's a key factor in finding and keeping mates and close friends, in choosing an occupation, in finding or keeping a job, and in defining the limits of an individual's success in a chosen field.

PA's effects permeate such supposedly neutral arenas as courtrooms and elections. Juries, for example, tend to attach more credence to the arguments of a winsome attorney than a less enticing counterpart. Each witness's testimony is unconsciously processed through jurors' perceptions of the individual's PA, and anyone accused of a crime is judged as much on his personal PA as on the facts introduced to a jury.

Since the 1960s, when television finally permeated even the most remote corners of America, it has been nearly impossible for a truly unsightly candidate to win national elective office. And it is almost as difficult for a PA-challenged person to win a local election as it would be to enter a beauty contest.

Millions of Americans have turned their waking lives into endless quests for enhanced PA, often at the expense of their health.

Just as the rise of the mass media has shaped public perceptions on the parameters of personal attractiveness, PA has reshaped the media itself. Where television news reporters once were unremarkable in appearance, it is now virtually impossible to find an American man or woman reading news copy to a camera who could not be described as attractive or good-looking. Fueled by an explosion of media images that glorify youth and beauty, millions of Americans have turned their waking lives into endless quests for enhanced PA, often at the expense of their health. So powerful are these media images that in the twentieth century, once-rare conditions such as anorexia and bulimia are commonplace throughout the Western world. Literally millions of young people, mostly female, have become so obsessed in the pursuit of attaining a single dimension of PA—body weight—that they willingly endanger their lives by denying their bodies essential nutrition. Other millions exhaust their savings or incur huge debts to pay for one or more cosmetic surgery procedures, often risking their lives. Fed by ever-increasing demand, hucksters, charlatans, and criminals of every stripe prey on vulnerable people, taking their money and leaving a trail of death and disfigurement in their wake.

At the turn of this century, the hottest fad in prime-time television was a raft of “reality” shows featuring young, attractive, and often scantily attired contestants competing for love and money. Whether a “tribe” transported to some remote but photogenic location, couples risking their lives to overcome fear, penniless male hunks presented as wealthy tycoons to clueless female sex objects, or men and women craving cosmetic makeovers, the common denominator is sex appeal: Except as the butt of some joke, reality contestants of average appearance are in short supply.

Even in death PA has news value: If a picture is available, television news directors are far more likely to air the killing or injury of an attractive victim than a plain one.

PA also has a profound influence on the nature and reach of Western culture, including how we define role models, who governs us, what products we buy, and what services we consume. It is a component of the core values that we pass along to our children and of our choice of friends; in short, the PA phenomenon permeates Western society and makes a powerful difference in the lives of hundreds of millions of people.

While PA's effects are amplified by mass media, the phenomenon itself is older than history: There is evidence that some Stone Age women in southern Europe styled their hair. Did they take the time and trouble it must have required 20,000 years before perms, curlers, and hair dryers merely to lure a better class of mastodon to dinner? I don't think so.

History began with the written word—and glamour immediately became an important part of it. For example, in the fourteenth century B.C., Egypt's queen was Nefertiti, whose name means “the beautiful one is come.” Did she have other qualifications? Important family connections or diplomatic skills? Management expertise? From her name alone it's obvious that few cared.

Even Aristotle (384–322 B.C.), ancient Greece's premier observer of human nature, recognized the importance of PA. “Personal beauty is a greater recommendation than any letter of reference,” he wrote.

And the Hebrew Bible, canonized some 3,000 years ago from far-older written and oral sources, repeatedly describes characters whose appearance affected all around them:

When Abram [later renamed Abraham] entered Egypt, the Egyptians saw how very beautiful the woman [his wife and half-sister Sarai] was. Pharaoh's courtiers saw her and praised her to Pharaoh, and the woman was taken into Pharaoh's palace. And because of her, it went well with Abram; he acquired sheep, oxen,

asses, male and female slaves, she-asses, and camels. (Genesis 12:14–16)

This is the story of a stranger in a strange land who becomes rich virtually overnight just because a powerful man admired the way his “wife” *looked*. How many times and with how many variations has this story been repeated throughout history, not to mention in our own time?

In medieval times, affluent noblewomen swallowed arsenic or dabbed bat’s blood on their skin to improve their complexions. As recently as the eighteenth century, American women washed themselves in the warm urine of a young boy to erase their freckles. Ever the dispassionate observer of nature, Charles Darwin wrote of a “universal passion for adornment” even when it required “wonderfully great” suffering.

At its root, PA may be the unconscious recognition that beauty serves to attract the opposite sex for the biological imperative of reproduction. Just as plants that use flowers to attract insects to pollinate them and animals to eat their fruit or otherwise spread their seeds are more successful in ensuring the survival of their species, nature commands us to notice the physical characteristics that tell us that a particular human is suitable for reproduction.

PA also has a profound influence on how we define role models, who governs us, what products we buy, and what services we consume.

In his 1989 landmark study of human mating preferences, Dr. David Buss, now a University of Texas professor of evolutionary psychology, logged mating preferences for more than 10,000 people of thirty-seven cultures and found that a woman’s PA was at the top or near it on every man’s list. His conclusion: Nothing is more important to a marriage-minded woman than her good looks.

This observation seems to have a basis in reproductive biology. For example, most men find a woman’s long, shiny hair appealing, even if they are not aware that hair is a visible history of body health; a woman with unhealthy-looking locks is likely a poor candidate to bear and rear children.

Acknowledging this appeal, to which men are attracted, many

traditional societies, especially in the Middle East, require women to cover their heads in public as a sign of modesty.

In virtually every culture, men find younger women more attractive than older ones, probably because females of our species are capable of reproduction for only a limited period.

Moreover, in most cultures, women are more attracted to older men than they are to younger ones. Could it be because men are capable of fathering children for nearly their entire adult lives, but older men usually have more resources to put at the disposal of their mate and their children?

Humans come in an astonishing variety of shapes, sizes, and appearances, which leads the less physically attractive woman to fret that no one will want her, that she will fail to reproduce and pass on her genes—or that she is incapable of attracting a mate who will have the ability to support her children.

Women compete to attract men; however, men compete for power and dominance, thus to be more attractive to women. These conditions have given rise to such enormous mercantile empires as Revlon, Max Factor, and L'Oréal; created myriad occupations from nail stylists and barbers to cosmetic chemists, liposuction technicians, and plastic surgeons; and contributed mightily to the growth of such industries as advertising and clothing manufacture—all merely to help men and women look better. Pursuit of greater PA has created a \$160-billion-a-year global industry ranging from weight-loss preparations, cosmetics, skin and hair care, and perfumes to cosmetic surgery, health clubs, and hormone injections. Americans spend more money each year on beauty enhancements than they do on education.

And it's not merely for powder and paint. Millions of Americans, including many in their supposed "golden years," have gone under the knife to enhance their appearance. Once almost exclusively the province of the wealthy and famous or the hideously malformed, today many Americans of very modest means scrimp and save for cosmetic surgery procedures aimed at making them more attractive.

The following chapters will examine how and why all this happens, and why it is more vital than ever to recognize and appreciate the phenomenon of physical attractiveness.

CHAPTER 1

Older Than Civilization



*A PA tour of the ancient world, from Stone Age
beauty parlors through Pharaonic Egypt and
the Bible to the face that launched a
thousand ships*

Her conception was the consequence of a royal cuckolding: Zeus, king of the gods, took the form of a swan to seduce and impregnate Queen Leda, wife of Tyndareus, King of Sparta. In due course Leda delivered an egg; when it hatched, out stepped the immortal daughter of Zeus, so utterly beautiful that her fame spread to every corner of the ancient world. Helen of Sparta became history's first superstar, famous throughout the civilized West long before the invention of mass media.

According to legend and ancient literature, Tyndareus remained unaware of Helen's true parentage. He forced her to marry the

wealthy, middle-aged Menelaus, brother of powerful King Agamemnon. Helen's subsequent kidnapping by the young, virile, amoral, but oh-so-handsome Paris set off a ten-year war that killed vast numbers and ruined many of the city-states that took part in the hostilities.

And what did Helen think of all this? Never mind the movies. Around 800 B.C., Homer and other ancient Greek poets paid scant attention to the thoughts or feelings of the woman behind the fabulous "face that launched a thousand ships." Kidnapped first by Theseus and then by Paris, she was rescued more than once by her brothers and her husband. Snatched back from Paris by an Egyptian king, Helen was later taken from that king's son by husband Menelaus, as told in *The Iliad* of Homer. And all the while, she seems to have remained nearly oblivious to the tumult and terror around her, to the rise and fall of those who sought to possess her beauty and those protecting her. Was she angry or frightened by her kidnapers? Amused? Aroused? Nothing in legend or literature describes Helen's feelings; she scarcely utters a word. Rather, she seems entirely neutral toward the men fighting over her, an empty vessel to be filled with the yearnings and aspirations of her admirers.

Was Helen (better known as Helen of Troy) flesh and blood, or merely a fictional plot device? No one can say with certainty. But what matters more is the feminine archetype that she represents. For thousands of years, Helen's abduction—even if, as some hold, she went willingly—has defined the ultimate insult, *casus belli* for any sanction, including war.

To the Greeks and those who embraced their culture, Helen represented the power and potency of human beauty, the immutable currency of physical attractiveness. But ancient Greece's appraisal of PA did not begin and end with Helen.

"Personal beauty is a greater recommendation than any letter of reference."

—Aristotle

Plato (427–347 B.C.) called good looks "the privilege of nature," while Socrates (469–399 B.C.) described beauty as "a short tyranny." As previously noted, Aristotle (384–322 B.C.) went still further: "Personal beauty is a greater recommendation than any

letter of reference.” Or perhaps Diogenes (403–323 B.C.) said that, as some scholars insist. Either way, what has come down to us from the Greeks shows a familiarity and deep respect for PA.

The ancient Hebrews also knew of PA and its role in affairs both human and Divine. In the Book of Genesis, Abraham is rewarded with gold, silver, slaves, and livestock because his wife, Sarah, is beautiful.

But there is much more to this story, which begins with a famine in Canaan. On their way to Egypt in search of a better life, Abraham tells Sarah that because she is a “woman of beautiful countenance,” when the Egyptians see them together they will understand that they are man and wife, and they will kill Abraham in order to take possession of Sarah. Abraham therefore pleads with Sarah to say that she is his sister, not his wife, so that instead of killing Abraham the Egyptians will treat him well as a means of wooing her!

Soon after arriving in Egypt, what Abraham predicted takes place: Pharaoh’s men “invite” Sarah into the palace, where the monarch pitches woo but somehow doesn’t connect. When God appears to Pharaoh in a dream, Abraham’s ruse is revealed. To stay in Abraham’s good graces—thereby avoiding the wrath of God—Pharaoh heaps treasure on him. This story is repeated a generation later, when Abraham’s son Isaac and his “very beautiful to behold” wife, Rebecca, place themselves under the protection of King Abimelech of Gerar, a Philistine. Fearing for his life, Isaac tells everyone that Rebecca is his sister, and sure enough, Abimelech’s men scoop her up. Again there is a royal dream, and afterward, Rebecca emerges unscathed from the palace and Abimelech posts a warning around his kingdom threatening the head of any man who lays a hand on Rebecca.

PA in men is also acknowledged in the Bible:

Joseph was handsome in form and appearance. (Genesis 39:6)

[David is] . . . a mighty man of valor, a man of war, prudent in speech and a handsome person. (1 Samuel 16:12).

Now in all Israel there was no one who was praised as much as Absalom for his good looks. (2 Samuel 14:25)

To the ancient Hebrews and the Christians who followed in their monotheistic spiritual path, physical beauty was a reward from the Almighty, and its opposite was punishment. As King Solomon put it in Ecclesiastes 8:1–10, “True wisdom, godly wisdom, can even benefit physical appearance. Sin often hardens the face as well as the heart, bringing lines of sadness, despair, guilt, and worry.” But wisdom, added the wisest monarch, “brightens a man’s face and changes its hard appearance.”

PA brought a special burden, however. “As a ring of gold in a swine’s snout, so is a lovely woman who lacks discretion” (Proverbs 11:22).

The Bible understood very well the power of PA to shape human affairs, and warned against its temptations:

Do not lust after her beauty in your heart;
 Nor let her allure you with her eyelids.
 For by means of a harlot a man is reduced to a crust of bread . . .
 (Proverbs 6:24–26)

While the Hebrews and Greeks were first to recognize the sway of physical attractiveness over human affairs and to chronicle the ways that PA shapes the human condition, PA was hard at work long before the rise of civilization.

Most anthropologists agree that our species evolved in Africa some 120,000 years ago. The scant evidence provided by the fossil record, however, suggests that until far more recently, the behavior of these anatomically modern humans was little different from that of their more primitive ancestors, which is to say that they spent their time hunting, gathering food, and procreating. If early man spent much time in intellectual pursuits, he left few indications of it.

In 2004, however, archaeologists excavating the Blombos Cave at the southern tip of Africa came to an unexpected insight: Clusters of mollusk shells that site workers had discovered over the past decade were found to have been pierced by tools held by human hands,

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then strung on some sort of cord.¹ In other words, they were not mere shells but *necklaces*—adornment. Definitively dated to 75,000 years ago, the forty-one tiny, orange-and-black beads are the oldest jewelry ever found, symbols of a prehistoric vanity that foreshadows the sort of baubles and bangles worn by women of every station in Helen of Troy's time, no less than in our own.

The Blombos find sent ripples around the world of anthropology and psychology. Experts in these fields concluded that the beads were proof that by expressing concepts of beauty and vanity, primitive humans had a capability for self-awareness. Other experts suggested that the beads were a means of social communication, inferring that these early people used symbolic reasoning—language—and individually felt a sense of group belonging.

Fair enough. But the beads, or necklaces, also suggest that even 75,000 years ago, women wanted to make a fashion statement, to stand out from the crowd. They wanted, in short, to catch a man's eye.

If the Blombos beads are the earliest indication of an appreciation of feminine beauty, they are far from the first proof that prehistoric humans appreciated the power of physical attractiveness. As evidence, meet the most famous femme of the Paleolithic Age, the Venus of Willendorf, a 25,000-year-old limestone fetish. Unearthed in what is now Austria, this figurine of a faceless, Rubenesque woman with luxuriously coiffed tresses demonstrates that at least some primitive women braided and curled their hair. An even earlier ivory object found in France, the Brassempouy Lady, has been dated to approximately 36,000 B.C. and depicts a woman whose hair is covered with a snood or net—an indication, perhaps, that even in the Stone Age, women were concerned about bad-hair days.

But why? How was it that just as many modern people take great pains with hair, makeup, and nails, primitive humans analogously felt the need to compete for sexual attention?

The answer lies in the biology of sexual attraction.

In high school, we learned that male birds boast colorful plumage in order to attract females to mate with; that bright blossoms serve to attract bees and other insects that pollinate plants; and that the males of such species as sheep, elk, and wolves lock horn, hoof,

and fang in sometimes mortal combat for the right to inseminate the females of their herd or pack.

Like birds, bees, and badgers, adult humans feel an unconscious desire to reproduce, thereby passing on the unique assortment of genetic material that makes each of us different. The biological purpose of beauty is to attract others of our species for sex. Sex, at least for humans, is usually enjoyable, but its biological purpose is not fun but reproduction. Many animals go far beyond fisticuffs to become more attractive to the opposite sex. Take, for example, the male zebra finch. Because nine out of ten female zebra finches swoon over red-beaked males and may even act like birdbrains for the one with the reddest beak, males cultivate red beaks. How? By ingesting fruits and vegetables such as carrots and tomatoes with the orange and red pigments called carotenoids. As it happens, zebra finches who eat the most carotenoids, which neutralize harmful free radicals and stimulate the immune system, are also the healthiest birds on their branch, proving that once again, Mom was right: If you want to grow up healthy and become a babe magnet, eat your veggies.²

If beauty attracts, a healthy, youthful appearance is attractive because it signifies reproductive capability. Men are attracted to younger women because their youth signifies this potential. Women's attraction to slightly older men rests on the assumption that an older man may have more resources to offer her children, enhancing the possibility that they will survive long enough to reproduce themselves.

But biologically speaking, not all men and all women are created equal. Some worry that if they are not attractive enough, no one will want to mate with them. They will not be able to pass along their genes or will not attract a mate capable of nurturing and supporting their children. All this stimulates competitiveness; women compete with one another to attract the best men, while men compete for positions of power and dominance in order to enhance their ability to attract the most beautiful women.³

While individual preferences vary, people generally agree about what is attractive in others; if that were otherwise, then the nature of the faces that regularly appear on magazine covers would vary far

more widely than it does, and motion picture and television casting directors would rarely require photos before auditioning candidates. But is there an absolute standard by which human beauty can be measured?

The Romans thought so. Their culture, which borrowed liberally from their Greek predecessors, understood the power of PA, but the Romans, at least in their literature, preferred to deal at greater length with the ramifications of its absence. That is to say, while Roman poetry, plays, and polemics abound with passages describing physical appearance, they are almost invariably detailed portraits of people who *lack* physical attractiveness. In other words, uglies.

To contemporary scholars of Roman letters, the Roman ideal of PA was “absence of physical blemishes or flaws” and “a harmonious relationship of parts to the whole.”⁴ The notion that human beauty is the absence of flaws rather than the presence of attractive features was noted long ago by Cicero (106–43 B.C.). In *The Nature of the Gods*, he concluded that when gods assume the human form, they should be free of blemishes. That being the case, however, they might appear identical to each other. This implies a standard of perfect beauty, where ugliness is measured by how far one departs from this standard.⁵

There might be something to that.

Meet Dr. Stephen Marquardt, a Southern California physician with a specialty in oral and maxillofacial surgery. After some twenty-seven years of surgical practice and teaching at UCLA, he established Marquardt Beauty Analysis, a foundation devoted “to proactively researching human visual aesthetics, including its biological and mathematical bases, and to utilizing the results of that research to develop and provide information and technology with which to analyze and positively modify (i.e., improve) human visual attractiveness.” And lots more, about which we will learn later in this book. In short, Marquardt is using science and surgery to make America more beautiful.

So far, he seems to be succeeding, if only by becoming the media’s go-to guy on the subject of facial beauty. Marquardt has appeared on dozens of network news and science programs, and his research has been cited in scores of newspaper and magazine articles.

His hands-on, beauty-is-a-quantifiable-property approach has even become the basis for at least one reality TV show, ABC's *Extreme Makeover*, during which men and women undergo a series of cosmetic surgeries designed to radically improve their appearance.

The gist of Marquardt's findings: Human beings find the greatest beauty in symmetry. More intriguingly, Marquardt argues that the basis of the ideal face is a mathematical concept called "phi" that expresses itself both throughout the natural world and in the manifold works of man.

Marquardt's research posits the existence of the "Golden Ratio" of 1.618:1; by itself the number 1.618 is called "phi." The ratio itself has been known by many names, including the Phi Ratio, the Fibonacci Ratio, the Divine Ratio, the Golden Mean, and the Golden Section. By incorporating the phi ratio in some way in triangles, pentagons, and other polygons (two-dimensional figures with more than four angles and sides) and then using these polygons in multiple to assemble progressively more complex geometric shapes, Marquardt has compiled an amazingly sophisticated variety of shapes based on phi components.

He's found these same shapes (and their component ratios) not only in attractive and/or utilitarian man-made objects and famous paintings, but, of course, in the human form. Most intriguingly, the ultimate geometric shape formed by Marquardt's phi-based polygons, which he dubbed the "Golden Decagon Matrix," neatly replicates the exact molecular configuration of the most common form of DNA—the building block of not only human biology but virtually all life forms on earth! Marquardt believes that this is proof that beauty is a biologically programmed component of all life.

Next, by applying mathematics to thousands of faces that neutral observers have deemed "attractive," Marquardt and his researchers constructed a massive database that depicts attractive human faces as collections of phi-based geometric shapes. From this database have come an assortment of patented masks that may be used as templates for comparative diagnosis of facial qualities and, more important, as the basis for cosmetic surgery, which is Marquardt's passion.⁶

If the secrets of facial beauty have yielded to scientific inquiry,

what about the rest of the physique? Is there an objective standard for bodily beauty in both men and women?

Ask a group of healthy young men what configuration of a woman's body most attracts them and most would agree that the hourglass figure—a slender waist separating large breasts from generous hips—would fill the bill. And ask a similar number of healthy young women about male bodies and most will agree that the holy trinity is big, balanced (symmetrical), and properly built with a waist-to-hip ratio of about 0.9, which is to say, a hip circumference only slightly larger than waist diameter.⁷ According to anthropologist Laura Betzig, like all animals, we humans are programmed to recognize the shape of health: Large, symmetrical, and proportioned humans are usually healthier than those with other shapes.⁸

Moreover, Dr. Peter Ellison, dean of Harvard University's Graduate School of Arts and Sciences and professor of anthropology and an authority on human sexual hormones, has demonstrated a correlation between a woman's hourglass figure and her reproductive ability.⁹ Or, as the tabloids put it when this discovery was announced, "Voluptuously endowed ladies are designed by nature for motherhood."

Could it be because women with narrow waists and large bustlines that accentuate the hips are more fertile than women otherwise endowed, and because of higher levels of certain hormones in their bodies, they are almost three times as likely to become pregnant following a single episode of sexual intercourse?

Ellison collaborated in an international study led by Grazyna Jasienska of Jagiellonian University in Krakow, Poland. Her team took measurements from 119 Polish women between the ages of twenty-four and thirty-seven. In particular, her researchers recorded each breast-to-under-breast ratio and waist-to-hip ratio.

High breast-to-under-breast ratios belong to women with large breasts. The three other categories of body shapes used in this study were 1) narrow waist/small breasts, 2) broad waist/large breasts, and 3) broad waist/small breasts.

Jasienska found that compared to the average of all women in the study, the blood of women with both large breasts and a small waist averaged 26 percent more 17 β -estradiol (estrogen) during

their entire menstrual cycle and 37 percent more during midcycle peak fertility days. These women also had more progesterone than women in all other categories.

According to Jasienska, the presence of larger concentrations of these hormones means that women with large breasts and a small waist are about three times more likely to get pregnant than women of other shapes!

Evolutionary biologists use the term “adaptive” to describe factors that contribute to greater reproductive success. Thus, if most men prefer women with large breasts and a small waist, and if such women *also* have more children than other women, then science concludes that this preference may have arisen for biological, evolutionary reasons.¹⁰

Therefore, if men subconsciously seek sexual partners with whom they are most likely to reproduce, the preference for big-busted, large-hipped women has probably evolved over thousands of generations.

This study also confirms what the marketing staff at toy maker Mattel, Inc. has known since 1959, when the Barbie doll first hit the market. Soon after introducing Barbie to the world, Mattel became the target of accusations that it was propagating an unwelcome, unrealistic, male-fantasy image of women. More than a billion Barbies later, however, the company can

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point to Jasienska’s research as a reason to continue marketing the doll: Barbie’s proportions, while atypical, are pretty much those of the woman most men would like to bear their children.

Not far from Barbie’s home in Southern California are the studios of another industry that has long understood that even men who don’t know what “adaptive” means are nevertheless attracted to voluptuous females.

When film directors cast such shapely sirens as Marilyn Monroe, Jane Russell, and Sophia Loren, millions of men paid to watch them on the screen. For the same reason, current male moviegoers and television watchers eagerly watch the likes of Jennifer Lopez, Kelly Brook, and Salma Hayek.

But not every woman can be big busted and narrow waisted, and so nature has developed another strategy to help women attract mates.

For example, a 2003 study led by Dr. Craig Roberts, a researcher at the United Kingdom's University of Newcastle, showed that no matter how plain or lovely it may appear at other times, a woman's face is most beautiful and alluring once a month—exactly when she is at the peak of her fertility.

Roberts and his researchers selected some fifty women between the ages of nineteen and thirty-three and took two photographs of each. The first depicted the woman's face eight to fourteen days after the first day of her menstruation cycle, the very time when she was probably most fertile. Two weeks later a second photo was taken. These photo pairs were viewed by 250 men and women, who were then asked to choose the image that showed the woman at her most attractive. Pictures of fertile women were chosen more often—and the 125 female viewers were more sensitive to fertility than the 125 male viewers.¹¹

The idea that women are sensitive to other women's cycles is not new. Since the origin of our species, this sensitivity has allowed females to assess their competitors when vying for the attention of males, even if they aren't fully conscious of it.

A related study conducted by Ian Penton-Voak, a lecturer in the department of psychology at the University of Stirling in England, showed that women prefer masculine-looking men when they are ovulating; but at other times of the month, they seek men with the softer features, associated with more social and caring behavior.¹²

If nature has stacked the deck in favor of well-proportioned bodies and symmetrical facial features closely adhering to the Golden Ratio, one might expect that over the thousands of generations in which we humans have propagated our species, most of us should be quite beautiful. Indeed, many of us are. But somehow, quite a few men and women who would never consider entering a beauty contest or pursuing careers in modeling nevertheless seem to be multiplying and making themselves fruitful.

That's because, not long after nature invented mankind, mankind—or perhaps womankind—invented clothes. And cosmetics.

Long before the Romans renamed the pantheon of Greek gods with Latin titles, before even the Golden Age of Greece, Egypt had developed a complex and sophisticated civilization. According to noted author and Egyptologist Joann Fletcher, clothing, wigs, and cosmetics were “employed by the ancient Egyptians as a means of display, social control, and identity, used for their erotic impact and ritual significance as well as their effect on the economy.”¹³

Fletcher, who is credited with identifying a previously anonymous mummy as possibly that of Queen Nefertiti (the subject of a Discovery Channel program), cites an abundance of archaeological evidence to show that in ancient Egypt “elaborate hairstyles [including wigs, hair extensions, and false braids], heavy cosmetics, and strong perfumes were worn by both men and women of all ages and social groupings for a wide variety of reasons, not least their practical and often therapeutic value.”

The earliest known cosmetics date from about 3100–2907 B.C. Tombs of Egypt’s first dynasty contained unguent jars; objects retrieved from later tombs suggest that these unguents were scented. Such preparations, as well as perfumed oils, were extensively used by both men and women to keep the skin supple and unwrinkled. Egyptian women also developed the art of eye decoration; they applied dark green color to the lower lid and blackened the lashes and upper lid with kohl, a preparation made from antimony or soot. References to painted faces appear in the Hebrew Bible, suggesting that the ancient Jews may have borrowed this custom from their neighbors to the south. By the Christian era, cosmetics were used by women throughout the Roman Empire. In addition to darkening lashes and brows and outlining the eyelids, women reddened their cheeks with rouge and dusted white powder on the skin to simulate or heighten fairness.

But why would a woman paint her face?

Perhaps because accentuating the eyes and tinting her cheeks makes a woman’s face more closely resemble the coloring Mother Nature provides at the peak of the fertility cycle. In other words, a woman may compete for male attention with those whose beauty has been temporarily enhanced through the hormonal changes that accompany ovulation. Accenting the face with makeup also provides

an approximation of the hue women display when sexually stimulated.

Greek mythology and Homeric literature include passages describing women who used not only cosmetics but also clothing, accessories, and jewelry to enhance their ability to attract men. Helen of Troy, no less than the goddesses Aphrodite and Hera, enhanced her natural beauty with dresses, veils, necklaces, arm rings, and belts in pursuit of the seduction of both man and god. In legend as in literature, these female costumes excite admiration and desire; such scenes sometimes are followed by the immediate fulfillment of desire through sexual intercourse.¹⁴

• • •

The PA phenomenon in antiquity was not limited to the West. While European and African women were using cosmetics as part of their strategies for attracting men, Asian women were similarly interested in maximizing their physical appeal to attract men.

A woman's face is most beautiful and alluring once a month—exactly when she is at the peak of her fertility.

That Chinese women in ancient eras took the time and trouble to make themselves more physically attractive is widely documented; the Confucian scholar Liu Xiang (ca. 77–76 B.C.) wrote that “[she] takes delight in one’s appearance.” During the Han dynasty (206 B.C.–8 A.D.), when male-dominated Confucianism established itself as the central ideology of governance, Chinese history records the triumph of a slim, agile, vivacious, and beautiful dancer named Chao Fei-yen who caught the eye of Emperor Ch’enti. While she became his concubine, Chao refused to be subservient to any man, even an emperor. Supported by her equally beautiful sister, Chao Hede, she wielded her beauty as a sword against Ch’enti, winning the support of powerful courtiers and throwing the palace into a chaotic power struggle. Although the Chao sisters failed to overthrow the ruler, their actions vividly illustrate that the ancient Chinese understood the power of PA.

In fact, to discourage further attempts by women to use their beauty as a way to assert independence of thought and action, the Confucians sought to promote dignity and moral virtue as more

admirable traits than feminine beauty. Compiled by Liu Xiang, the *Lienu zhuan* purports to be a biographical compendium of 125 exemplary women. But the book is more polemic than historical, because Liu's text warns women against using their beauty to gain power and argues that external physical beauty is merely a manifestation of internal virtue, defined as adherence to traditional, male-dominated values. To demonstrate the virtues of obedience, several biographies describe several physically unattractive women who nevertheless became empress as a result of inner qualities. Women lacking such virtue are described as schemers who seek to entrap men in sensual pleasures in order to distract them and then fulfill their own selfish plans. Such women, the book concludes, cause disruption in families and contribute to the decay and failure of a state.¹⁵

Given the biological imperative to reproduce that fuels the PA phenomenon, it's no surprise that over the millennia men and women have learned how to use beauty for personal advantage, and that these techniques have been handed down, generation by generation, as part of the larger culture. And most of us learn how to play the game very early in life.

CHAPTER 2

Pass the Genes, Please: How Looks Drive Dating, Courtship, and Marriage



*The often strange ways that PA drives
social intercourse*

“Never judge a book by its cover.”

“Beauty is only skin deep.”

“Beauty is in the eye of the beholder.”

These maxims, each a comment on the superficiality and subjectivity of physical attractiveness, are ingrained in Western culture and often expressed in literature. Scientific research, however, shows that they are purely myths.¹

Dr. Judith Langlois, a University of Texas psychologist who has devoted her career to infant research, directs the Langlois Social Development Lab in the Department of Psychology at UT’s Austin campus. Her landmark studies show that the polar opposites of these hoary adages are far closer to fact.

Langlois’s studies suggest that people *do* agree about who is and isn’t attractive, both within and across ethnicity and culture. Beauty

is therefore *not* merely in the eye of the beholder. And as we saw in the previous chapter, there are almost certainly universal standards of physical attractiveness.

But do we really never judge a book by its cover?

Were that literally the case, then the work of dozens of art departments and the often brilliant marketing on behalf of the upwards of 55,000 mass-market books published annually in the United States is wasted effort. Clearly it is not! While people buy books for many reasons, a good title and an interesting cover or jacket may strongly influence the buying decision.

However, let's use the statement as the metaphor it was probably intended to convey. In that case, when it comes to deciding about people and their personal qualities, studies show that attractive adults and children are usually judged more favorably and treated more positively than are unattractive adults and children, *even by those who know them.*²

And that is—surprise, surprise—because even though both attractive and unattractive people “exhibit positive behaviors and traits, *attractive* people exhibit *more* positive behaviors and traits than unattractive individuals.” Beauty, it turns out, goes deeper than skin, hair, and clothes.³ Beauty is, as Forrest Gump's mom might say, as beauty does.

But this chapter is about dating, so let's slip into some fancy threads, get ourselves all gussied up, and step out into the wild world of one-on-one social intercourse.

The leading predictor in determining whether two people will have a relationship of any sort is spatial contact, also called *proximity* or *propinquity*. That is to say, they must somehow meet, usually often, before they can connect.⁴

Until the twilight of the twentieth century, meeting a possible mate was almost always a face-to-face activity. Even when helpful friends and relatives made introductions and even if a telephone conversation might precede an actual meeting, there was little chance for a meeting of minds, much less emotional engagement, until that face-to-face meeting.

Additional ways evolved to help the mate-minded. Early on, so-called marriage brokers peddled “picture brides” of women living

overseas who were willing to come halfway around the globe to marry a man they didn't know in exchange for the chance to live in this new world. Following the disintegration of the Soviet Union in 1989, thousands of Eastern European women sought to become picture brides for an American husband, and many did so.

Not all picture brides were volunteers. Some were forced into the arrangement by desperately poor families hoping to make a little money from the transaction; given their economic circumstances, few picture brides had viable options.

In recent years, however, the rise of the Internet has led to dating services that connect millions of people with others with whom they probably would never have met otherwise. The picture brides of former times have morphed into the online avatars of Web dating sites.

In the first half of 2003, Americans spent \$214.3 million on personal ads and online dating, which by 2003 had become the most lucrative form of legal paid online content. In a single month

While shared values and common life goals are important, by far the most important factor is what can be gleaned from the picture accompanying the person's online profile.

during 2003, 40 million Americans visited at least one online dating site, more than a fourth of all Internet users for that month. They browsed popular sites such as Yahoo! Personals and Match.com, which boasts 12 million users worldwide, as well as far more modest sites focused on ethnic or religious groups or designed to serve those with a strong interest in a particular activity, such as pets, physical fitness, politics, or astrology. A social networking site

dubbed Friendster, which encourages people to meet through their mutual friends, claims over 3 million members.⁵

Novelist Jennifer Egan, writing about this phenomenon for *The New York Times Magazine*, interviewed dozens of online daters, men and women of all ages. Online dating resembles online shopping in that it involves browsing descriptions or profiles of a seemingly infinite number of possible mates and choosing the few that seem best suited for one's dating goal, whether that's a pal, a life-long mate, a short-term sexual fling, or something in between. Those who browse are also browsed. The successful online dater

strives to write a succinct yet compelling narrative that puts the individual's personal qualities and life experiences in the most favorable possible light.

Egan concluded, however, that while shared values and common life goals are important to those seeking a long-term relationship, by far the most important factor in deciding whether to meet another person face-to-face is what can be gleaned from the picture accompanying the person's online profile. In other words, PA.

"Dating profiles are works in progress," writes Egan, "continually edited and tweaked, fortified with newer, more flattering pictures." Because an inviting photo is so crucial, photographers in major cities have begun to specialize in creating sexy personal profile pictures, usually at rates comparable to those paid for wedding photos. Those who can't afford to hire a professional expend much time and effort in do-it-yourself photography, "trying to take sexy pictures of myself," writes one of Egan's *Times* interviewees. "The good ones have produced lots of responses," he adds.⁶

Even so, online daters often discover that the photo they fell in love with, like the carefully written profile that it accompanies, doesn't tell the whole story. "Most online daters have at least one cranky tale of meeting a date who was shorter or fatter or balder or generally less comely than advertised," writes Egan. She also found that by dropping a year or two off her age, "a

forty-year-old woman will appear in many more men's searches." That's because with so many profiles available, screening for the ones that interest a particular browser means making arbitrary choices of such personal descriptors as age, height, and weight. Thus, a man who is, say, five feet ten inches might decide to call himself six feet in hopes of getting past the invisible barrier that transforms a man of average height into a shorty.⁷

Online daters often discover that the photo they fell in love with, like the carefully written profile that it accompanies, doesn't tell the whole story.

Even if millions of Americans experiment with online dating, the vast majority of us still meet people the old-fashioned way: face-to-face. The first letter of one's family name, if it becomes the basis of, for example, a classroom seating chart, college dorm room assignment, or military transport slot, is an example of how arbitrary

determinants give individuals opportunities to meet each other. One classic study of how people meet and make friends was done at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (Festinger, Schachter, and Back, 1950). According to this study, 65 percent of groups of three closest friends lived in the same building, while 41 percent were next-door neighbors, 22 percent resided only two doors apart, and only 10 percent lived at opposite ends of a hallway.

So it should be no surprise that until 1917, when the United States sent legions of young men to France to fight in World War I, most people who married in this country found a mate among schoolmates, in their small town or city neighborhood, or within their own religious community.

The war changed all that. Some 2 million American soldiers served in Europe, most of them in France. A substantial fraction remained after the war ended to serve as occupation troops in Germany. At least 10 million French, British, German, Dutch, Italian, Russian, and other Europeans, a majority of them young men, died during the war. Many of the women they left behind found husbands among the soldiers of the American Expeditionary Force.

In 1919, songwriter Arthur Fields penned “How ’Ya Gonna Keep ’Em Down on the Farm (After They’ve Seen Pared),” a popular ditty that took note of the fact that America’s returning soldiers, having been exposed to European culture and sophistication, often chose not to make their postwar lives in the rural communities of their birth or childhood. To put it another way, after the Great War, millions of former farm boys moved to the city. So did millions of farmer’s daughters, not only to find work in the nation’s burgeoning factories and offices, but also in search of an independent life, where they were free to marry whom they chose—or not at all.

America’s participation in World War I changed the nation in many ways. In only a few years, the United States made the leap from a sleepy, largely agricultural, developing nation to an industrialized world power. American businesses, great and small, long established and newly formed, prospered during this war; the decade following World War I was a time of rapidly expanding prosperity.

In 1920, American women won the right to vote, and although

this franchise fell far short of full equality with men, it underpinned a heady and liberating time for young American women. This was the era of Clara Bow, the rags-to-riches silent film beauty known as the “It Girl.” Foreshadowing the 1960s, the young of the Roaring Twenties staked out new frontiers in personal and especially sexual liberty, throwing off many of the puritanical prohibitions of their forebears.

As America’s standard of living increased and its cities boomed, mass media blossomed as never before. Thousands of new theaters offered feature films; network radio became a national phenomenon; and rafts of slick, four-color magazines, all subsidized by the explosive growth of advertising, relentlessly promoted the ideals of beauty, youth, and thinness. The cosmetics industry boomed as never before.

This brings us to the so-called Coolidge effect, named, perhaps in jest, for President Calvin Coolidge, who occupied the White House from 1923 to 1929, just as America was beginning to throw off its puritanical bonds. According to a possibly apocryphal tale, there came a time when President Coolidge and his wife visited a chicken farm. While the president was in another part of the property, a farmer showed Mrs. Coolidge a rooster that, he said, could copulate with a hen all day long, every day.

“Tell that to the president,” she told the farmer, who dutifully conveyed this information to Coolidge.

“With the *same* hen?” responded the famously taciturn chief executive.

“No, sir,” replied the farmer. “With *different* ones.”

“Tell *that* to Mrs. Coolidge,” returned the president.⁸

Thus the First Couple learned that males are usually more excited by sexual novelty than are females, a phenomenon confirmed through experiments with several different species. For example, a male rat put into a cage with a previously unknown female rat usually begins their relationship with a frenzy of copulation. After a while, however, the male rat loses interest in sex. Indeed, it is often very difficult to persuade it to copulate with the female. But when a *different* female is put in the cage, the male reverts to stud behavior

and again avidly engages in copulation—but again, only for a time. If this process is repeated with new females, the male will continue to copulate until it is totally exhausted, and often even beyond that.⁹

Rats are mammals. Humans are mammals. Does this mean that men are rats?

Judging by their behavior toward women, *some* men clearly are much like rats. But even *they* are merely behaving as male *Homo sapiens*, a species whose psychological sexual preferences and reproductive strategy evolved over many millennia.

Consider the phenomenon of human sexual success strategies as discussed in “Theory of Parental Investment,” by Robert Trivers, which notes that while females require only a few matings to fertilize all their available eggs, males can potentially fertilize more eggs than any one female can produce. A female’s reproductive success is therefore limited by her access to resources to nourish each of her eggs; male reproductive success is limited by his access to a female’s eggs. The difference between male and female mating strategies, then, as perceived by the parents of healthy teenagers, is that while their daughter may become pregnant by the boy next door, their son might well impregnate every girl in the neighborhood.¹⁰

Is that why so many women support Planned Parenthood and so many men don’t?

Well, no. The reason that men of many societies often seem obsessed with impregnating their women is entangled with the history of human evolution.

Until comparatively recent times, we humans competed for day-to-day survival with a host of lethal carnivores, and more than occasionally served as prey for the largest. When climatic conditions or other factors made food scarce—a frequent occurrence for hunter-gatherers—tribes, clans, and individuals competed or warred against each other for survival. In such instances, the young were especially vulnerable. Many starved. Others were killed.

Moreover, until the early twentieth century—a blink of the eye in terms of evolutionary development—when the introduction of antiseptics sharply reduced the risk of infection and the first vaccines were deployed against a multitude of childhood illnesses, women

often died in childbirth and many children succumbed to disease or infection long before they reached adulthood.

Accordingly, the Coolidge effect probably became part of human male behavior because impregnating as many females as possible increases the probability that some children, at least, will survive long enough to reproduce themselves. As humans evolved, those men who impregnated more females were more likely to pass on their genes to offspring that survived. Females of our species, however, comport themselves according to a different set of biological imperatives. While they also seek to pass along their genes, once pregnant, the female's goal is to nurture the new life growing inside her. After a baby is born, the mother's agenda is to protect and assist the child until it becomes self-sufficient. This was usually possible only with help from her mate, and so until comparatively recent times, a father who abandoned a wife and child probably doomed one or both to death by starvation. Women of childbearing age are therefore biologically programmed to seek potential mates who will help protect and support their children.¹¹

The major difference between the sexual strategies of men and women, then, is that women demand stability and commitment in a relationship, whereas men prefer variety.

This returns us to the Coolidge effect. If males are programmed to prefer sexual variety, women, who compete with one another for what they hope are loyal and monogamous mates, have been smart enough to find ways to *simulate* that variety by frequently changing their appearance. Using cosmetics to alter or enhance facial features; shortening or lengthening their hair and changing its color; dressing in a different style; accessorizing with jewelry, scarves, hats, and so forth—each technique introduces an element of “newness” into the equation and appeals to the innate male desire for novelty.

But is this a conscious choice? Are women whose dress impresses men with their sexual qualities aware of the effect of their wardrobe choices on men?

To find out, two professors, Ed Edmonds and Delwin Cahoon,

Women demand stability and commitment in a relationship, whereas men prefer variety.

created a study involving forty-four men and eighty-nine women. These college students rated forty pictures of women's apparel in terms of the extent to which they felt men would be sexually aroused by women wearing them. One conclusion: "Females were very knowledgeable concerning the sexual impact of clothing styles on men." Moreover, a second phase of this study showed that women who perceived themselves as "sexually attractive" displayed a marked preference for clothes that men judged to be the most sexually exciting. In other words, women interested in attracting men will dress in ways calculated to excite them.¹²

If the Coolidge effect helps explain why men are attracted to women whose attractive appearance varies, often the "contrast effect" confirms what many people consider their most important high school lesson: If you're an average Joe trying to put the moves on that cute girl in history class, don't do your number while in the company of your handsome, muscular pals from the varsity football squad.

Or, as one research study put it, "When viewed in conjunction with highly attractive others, a person of average attractiveness may be judged less attractive than had the person been evaluated without an immediate comparison group."¹³ That holds true even when a person of average or ordinary attractiveness is viewed with people whom everyone would expect to be gorgeous, such as a mob of movie stars or a squad of supermodels.¹⁴

The contrast effect, moreover, also applies to *self*-evaluation. A man of moderate attractiveness who works, for example, in the fashion industry, and is frequently in the presence of those whose PA is both their livelihood and their identity, will often feel that he is less attractive than he actually is. But the reverse is also true: Comparing himself to less attractive men boosts his ego and makes him feel more attractive.¹⁵

But it's not just about feeling attractive or unattractive. The contrast effect also influences self-esteem, which is linked to increased or decreased public self-consciousness and heightened social anxiety. In America's PA-shaped cosmos, you *are* as you *believe* you look. And if you are, for example, someone who strongly believes that thin is *in*, but fat is where *you're* at, then merely being exposed

to pictures of people of your own gender with an idealized physique can lead to feelings of anxiety and loss of self-esteem. It could even propel you into a depressed state.¹⁶

Being highly aware of one's PA, whether high or low, may lead to *public* self-consciousness, which is to say a frequent concern with oneself as an object of attention by others. This in turn usually means that such people have more concern for, and are more responsive to, what they believe are the criteria by which others judge their behavior and personal attributes. This differs from *private* self-consciousness, a predisposition to consider only one's own motives, thoughts, and feelings.

According to at least one study, people with public self-consciousness seem to be far more aware of their own PA than others who are less self-conscious—and they will therefore respond more quickly to the ways others judge their appearance. This same study concluded that the *publicly* self-conscious are seen by others as having more PA than those who are less publicly self-conscious, which might simply reflect that this group expends more time and energy enhancing PA.¹⁷

So, if you're very aware of how other people may judge your appearance, and most of those other people think you're highly attractive, are *you* also aware of their perceptions? Probably not. Several studies designed to answer just that question found no corresponding relationship between people's level of public self-consciousness and their evaluation of their own physical attractiveness.¹⁸

Some studies conclude that the tendency for those with high public self-consciousness to be more highly invested in their appearance means that they hold themselves to an unreasonably high PA standard. In short, they work hard to stay attractive and often succeed, but that effort does little to ease their deep concerns over their own looks.¹⁹

PA's significance to interpersonal reactions and to development of the concept of "self" has been noted in many other studies. More to the point, in the world of dating, the cultural emphasis is on not only PA, but the concept that the ideal *female* body is thin. Thus, the contrast effect probably is of most relevance to women.²⁰

• • •

Regardless of how involved with one's own appearance a person is, and despite frequent lip service to such factors as personality, intelligence, a sense of humor, and shared interests, a multitude of studies show that PA is by far the most important factor in evaluating both prospective mates and prospective dates.²¹ This conclusion was graphically demonstrated in a landmark 1966 experiment conducted at the University of Minnesota in Minneapolis.

A team of social psychologists rounded up 664 student volunteers and asked them to participate in a "computer dance" where their partner of the evening would be selected by a computer. In reality, the partners were matched randomly with a single constraint: Researchers ensured that each man was taller than his female partner.

At intermission, the band took a break and rating forms were passed around. Participants answered questions, such as how much they liked their date, how eager they were to ask the person out again, how attractive they found their date, how attractive they thought their date found them, and so forth.

The researchers wanted to see if the dates' rated physical attractiveness corresponded to how much their partner liked them. The researchers' starting hypothesis was that if personality, intelligence, and other qualities are indeed important, then the linkage of ratings of physical attractiveness to "liking the person" should not be high.

In fact, however, men placed significant importance on PA, as shown by a very high correlation—78 percent—between how attractive male participants rated their date and how much they liked her. For women the correlation was only slightly lower: 69 percent.

While the researchers had anticipated there would be some importance for PA, they were surprised that other factors, which they considered nearly as important, actually mattered so little. For example, the experimenters knew how each subject had ranked in high school and used this as a measure of relative intelligence. Although typical student subjects said that they wanted dates that were intelligent, in reality students' smarts had no correlation at all with how well their dates liked them.

The researchers had also expected that the partners of students with introverted personalities would not like them very much as future dates. Wrong again! Data from the “computer dance” experiment showed that there was no difference between introverted and extroverted personalities when it came to being liked by a date. What mattered was how pretty or handsome the other person was.

The conclusion of this seminal study: The only thing that seemed to matter to these young college students was the physical attractiveness of their date.²²

In the previous chapter we saw that some standards of feminine and masculine appearance are accepted by nearly everyone in our culture as idealizing physical attractiveness. It is obvious, however, that few people ever attain such perfection or anything close to it. For most of us, PA is less definable, a mixture of what our eyes tell us and what our brain computes. But many aspects of PA have been studied, and it is now possible to say, with some precision, that when it comes to selecting a mate, certain elements of appearance usually attract men to women and vice versa.

Casual, unscientific perusal of personals ads—also called “lonely hearts advertisements” or, in their newest incarnation, Internet dating profiles—reveals that women are most concerned about a potential husband’s *height*, while men express the most concern over the *weight* of any possible bride. In other words, men even an inch under average height and women more than twenty pounds overweight may have a tougher time getting a date.

Both preferences are confirmed by scientific studies. In a published study on responses to lonely hearts advertisements and the effects of reported physical attractiveness, Lynn and Shurgot reported that a female’s height did not influence the responses she received from her ad, but those who described themselves as slender received more replies. Tall males with dark hair received more replies than did shorter males with lighter hair.²³

More recently, Daniel Nettle, who divides his time between the departments of biological sciences and psychology at the U.K.’s Open University, studied contemporary populations. He concluded that “tall men have greater reproductive success than shorter men . . . due to their greater ability to attract mates.”

Nettle also studied data from Britain's National Child Development Study to examine the life histories of a large, representative sample of U.K. women. These data showed that extremely tall and extremely short women have a high incidence of poor health that affects fertility and childbearing; women between these extremes bore the most children. But the data also showed that "maximum reproductive success was found below the mean height for women." In other words, natural selection of mates favors women selecting tall men and men hooking up with shorter women.²⁴

This is probably not news to those who have sweated out an apprenticeship in bodybuilding, but perhaps because of mankind's long evolutionary development as a hunter, women find men with *moderately* developed torsos the most attractive. In several studies featuring silhouettes of differently shaped male torsos, women showed a strong preference for a shape consistent with the ideal hunting physique: strong shoulders, suggesting good throwing ability, but not too much muscle mass, an excess of which negatively affects endurance.²⁵

In one study, thirty women were asked to rate the attractiveness of men in color pictures. Each male figure was prerated for its waist-to-chest ratio, waist-to-hip ratio, and body mass index. Waist-to-chest ratio was the principal determinant of attractiveness: Males with narrow waists and a broad chest and shoulders were rated as being more attractive. A more recent 2003 study spotlights a payoff for hours spent in the gym: Men with higher shoulder-to-hip ratios reported having sex at an earlier age and with more sexual partners.²⁶

If muscles are not in your present or future, think facial hair. After grooming annual data on British beard fashions between 1842 and 1971, researcher Nigel Barber concluded, in part, that women perceive men with beards as having "the biological and social qualities that would enhance their value as husbands" and also consider them "more potent and more active, suggesting virility as well as physical attractiveness."

Barber cited other studies that concluded that *female* managers, unlike their *male* managerial counterparts, considered bearded men to be more competent. That's right. Female bosses expect the

bearded dude to handle things better, while male bosses are unimpressed with another man's facial foliage.

Barber's original research concluded that men have long used facial hair as a way to increase physical attractiveness, especially when they must compete for a limited number of women. "Mustaches and facial hair in general are more frequent when there is a good supply of single men of marriageable age," he wrote. That is to say, when there's lots of competition for wives, men grow beards and mustaches to give them an extra edge.

But what about times when there are more available women than unmarried men? Barber correlated data on out-of-wedlock births with facial hair fashions and concluded that men seemed far less enamored of cultivating mustaches and beards during periods when illegitimate birthrates soared, implying a surplus of possible brides and a shortage of grooms.²⁷

A venerable stereotype of American fiction, including novels, movies, and television, is the wealthy older man who marries a beautiful younger woman, the so-called trophy wife. Like many stereotypes, it is grounded in fact, because while physical attractiveness is important to women, as a group they are more willing to trade good looks for socioeconomic status.²⁸

The basis of trophy wife syndrome is that men express their strong interest in PA by seeking to marry women at least five years their junior. But even with expensive skin and hair care and cosmetic surgery, every woman's PA fades with time—and so, in choosing a mate, the preferred age gap increases as men age.²⁹

You're tall, you work out every day, you've got broad shoulders, a lean, manly waist, symmetrical features, and loads of thick, dark hair. Girls and women swoon at the mere sight of you, and even mature women are tongue-tied in your presence. You could be a movie star, but you have other priorities. Is it *inevitable* that the mother of your children will be a living Barbie, a large-breasted, small-waisted woman with womanly hips, long, thick hair, symmetrical features, and skin glowing with good health?

While physical attractiveness is important to women, as a group they are more willing to trade good looks for socioeconomic status.

Actually, the mother of your children could be a woman who, by objective standards, has only average PA. Or less.

That's because the two sexes, as already discussed, pursue substantially different reproductive strategies. Women have evolved to seek husbands whose status and power will better provide for their children. So, while women care about men's looks, they don't choose the father of their children on that basis alone.

This conclusion is the fruit of several studies, including an amusing 1990 experiment by John Marshall Townsend and Gary D. Levy. A total of 382 college students, of whom 212 were female, viewed photographs pre-rated for physical attractiveness, where the ratings were "very attractive," "ordinary," and "only a mother could love that face." Women viewed photos of men, and men viewed photos of women. The photos were matched with three levels of occupational status and income: wealthy, average, and poor. The students were asked to indicate their willingness to engage in relationships of varying levels of sexual intimacy and marital potential with the people in the photos. After analyzing the results, researchers concluded that women are more likely to limit sexual intercourse to relationships involving affection and the possibility of marriage. Women also placed more emphasis than men do on their possible partners' socioeconomic status. Therefore, status, along with the willingness and ability to invest affection and resources in a relationship, often outweighs the effects of PA in a woman's selection of a partner.³⁰

Or, as syndicated newspaper columnist Amy Alkon ("The Advice Goddess") put it, women "said they'd choose an ugly man wearing a Rolex over a handsome man in a Burger King uniform—no matter whether they were pairing up for the long haul or the short roll."³¹ However, actions speak louder than words when looks actually enter the scene. People do in fact trade the appeal of a potential mate's greater finances for another possessing much greater PA. Examples abound. Of course, all this is influenced by the magnitude of these differences.

But what about choosing between a handsome jerk and a sensitive, average-looking fellow oozing sincerity and kindness—the classic nice guy? Which would most women choose?

Most average Joes will shake their heads knowingly. They've heard a lot of women say that they wish they could date kind, sensitive men—but when actually given that choice, they reject them in favor of a handsome devil with good clothes and a new car. In other words, nice guys always finish last.

But is it really so?

Several studies explore this stereotype. In one, four dozen women between the ages of eighteen and twenty-three (students at a private Northeastern college) read scripts depicting two men competing for a date with a woman in a setup much like a popular TV show, *The Dating Game*. In the script read by test subjects, "Susan" interviews "Todd" and "Michael" and is asked to choose which one to date based on the way they answer her questions. One male "candidate" was randomly assigned one of three conditions. "Nice Todd" gave responses that showed him to be kind, attentive, and emotionally expressive. "Middle Todd" gave more neutral responses, while "Jerk Todd" came off as an insensitive, self-absorbed, macho jerk. Regardless of how Todd acts, he is competing against Michael, whose middle-of-the-road responses are identical in all three conditions. Each female participant read only one version of Todd's responses, depending upon the condition to which she was assigned (the labels "Nice," "Middle," and "Jerk" were omitted). After reading the script, the students were asked to state which man (Todd or Michael) Susan should choose and whom they would choose for themselves.³²

This study, however, ignored the PA dimension—nothing was said about how Todd or Michael looked. So the researchers undertook a second study, similar to the first. This study considered the responses of 194 young women students between the ages of eighteen and twenty-five from a large Southeastern public university. This time, however, in addition to the varying responses of "Todd" and the unchanging responses of "Michael," a supposed degree of physical attractiveness was presented.

For the PA dimension of the study, twenty female undergraduates who did not participate in the larger experiment rated photographs of men aged 18 to 25 for physical attractiveness. Based on their evaluations, three photos were selected: one of a man judged

highly attractive and two rated similarly as having medium to low attractiveness.

In this second study, Todd's "niceness" was manipulated (just as it was in the first study), but participants also viewed photographs of both "Todd" and "Michael" in which Todd's PA also varied. The two photos of men of medium to low attractiveness represented Attractiveness Level One (matching PA); as in the earlier study, one character was called "Todd" and the other "Michael." The third photo, rated *high* in attractiveness, represented "Todd" at Attractiveness Level Two. Michael's photograph, like his responses, always remained the same.

This arrangement yielded six conditions in which "Todd's" attributes varied while "Michael's" remained the same:

1. Nice Todd—Matched Attractiveness
2. Neutral Todd—Matched Attractiveness
3. Jerk Todd—Matched Attractiveness
4. Nice Todd—Mismatched High Attractiveness
5. Neutral Todd—Mismatched High Attractiveness
6. Jerk Todd—Mismatched High Attractiveness

Each study participant was randomly assigned to read a script and view photos in one of these conditions.

While the overall results indicated that both niceness and physical attractiveness were positive factors in women's choices, as well as desirability ratings they assigned each man, the reasons women chose either man varied. When it came to evaluating a man's desirability for a serious relationship, one that could lead to marriage, "niceness" was the most important factor. But if the circumstances were that the woman sought primarily a casual, sexual relationship, PA won the day almost every time.³³

So handsome jerks get to sow a lot of wild oats, but nice guys get married, have children, and live happily ever after.

Well, no. Researchers Geoffrey C. Urbaniak of Wesleyan University and Peter R. Kilmann of the University of South Carolina also noted a disconnect between what women report in research studies and what they actually do in real life.

PA was the most important factor in predicting desirability for both sexes, and men consistently acknowledged this fact. Women, however, “rated the desired level of relationship commitment as the most important factor that influenced their mate selection when, in fact, it was one of the least important factors behaviorally,” the researchers wrote. “Women were more likely to express a preference for the nice guy if they, themselves, viewed sex as less important, had had fewer sexual partners, and preferred that their dating partners have fewer partners.” In other words, despite expressed preferences, many women who participated in this and other such studies actually wanted nice guys only as friends or long-term boyfriends, but preferred “bad boys”—those more physically attractive and willing to manipulate women into sexual activity—as sexual partners.³⁴

So handsome jerks get to sow a lot of wild oats, but nice guys get married, have children, and live happily ever after? Well, no.

• • •

Fat or phat, tall or short, buff or puff, by the time men and women pass through puberty they are on the lookout for mating opportunities. Regardless of personal PA, however, and the differing agendas or reproductive strategies of male and female, each person brings a unique personality and outlook to the mix. Some people may be deficient in PA but nevertheless feel entitled to seek a mate of substantially higher PA. Others may reek of PA but remain oblivious to it. Still others may be aware of the effects of their own high PA but have psychological reasons for discounting it.³⁵

In other words, there may be very attractive people who would be rated a “10” on a scale of physical attractiveness—where a “1” is Quasimodo (*The Hunchback of Notre Dame*) and a “5” is any of the people we pass in the street every day—and who, for an infinite

variety of reasons, might settle for a “6” or even a “4.” But why would a “4” believe that any “10” would accept them?

One possible answer lies in the concept of entitlement, which has been studied by Erich Goode.³⁶ An individual or members of some group or category may feel that they “have a right to certain privileges, that specific rewards should be forthcoming, that the resources they covet are rightfully theirs by virtue of what they have done or who they are.” Thus, some men feel entitled to sex if they buy their date a nice meal or a few drinks. In decades past, more than a few women felt entitled to a marriage commitment after an exclusive dating relationship had lasted for some commonly agreed upon period of time—say, a year. In like manner, some people feel entitled to have an exclusive romantic relationship with a partner who has a certain value in the dating marketplace, even—or especially—if the partner is far better looking than they are.

Entitlement, according to Goode, exists in two dimensions: There’s subjective entitlement, or what the person who feels entitled expects, and objective entitlement, or what society or a given community feels this person deserves. Whether these two dimensions agree with each other is largely a matter of the participants’ cultural, social, and economic structures, which define notions of fairness and equity. Thus, for example, twenty-first-century America will tolerate, albeit with some amusement, a rich but unattractive woman whose mate is considered handsome and virile but comes from a family of penniless immigrants. Each may feel entitled to the other, the man because of his good looks and the woman because of her wealth.

There is also a prestige factor to be gained in dating a physically attractive person. Men, especially, believe that they make a better impression on others by appearing in public with an especially attractive date than without one. This is an extension of what some social scientists term “the halo effect,” when PA is generalized to other dimensions, such as social or intellectual skills. Research studies strongly suggest that the halo effect makes an impression on perceived social and intellectual competence.³⁷

But why would a highly attractive woman agree to date a less attractive man whom she suspects is using her beauty to enhance his

social standing? For exactly the same reason: to gain access to a social circle to which she might otherwise not be admitted.

On the other side of the coin, sometimes highly attractive people prefer to date less attractive people. A “10” who wishes to be valued for less obvious qualities may seek dates with far less attractive women who offer the opportunity to display other qualities that transcend PA; in this scenario, a woman with high physical attractiveness might seem superficial.

Power also plays a role in a romantic relationship. In any sort of intimate coupling—parent and child, husband and wife, even close friends—the member of the couple who values the relationship least is in a position to control the other by threatening, either overtly or implicitly, to end the relationship. Thus, a child, lacking the maturity to understand the long-term ramifications, tries to manipulate a parent by withholding affection, and a parent, fearing to alienate the child, gives in to unreasonable demands.

In a romantic relationship, an extremely attractive person may exert power over his or her less-attractive partner by threatening to end the relationship. Those who are endowed with high PA sometimes seek less attractive mates precisely in order to exert that power. Less attractive people may attract more attractive mates by yielding to their whims. While such relationships may not endure, they frequently persist long enough to allow reproduction.

Conversely, less attractive people may avoid relationships with more attractive mates because they fear just such an outcome.

Another factor is availability, which is a factor of both location and chronology. If two people who might seem made for each other never meet, they will never become a couple. The group of possible dating partners for any one individual is called a “courtship pool.” At any given time, this pool may or may not contain individuals of opposite sexes with correspondingly high PA. The value of members of a given dating pool to a given person, and that person’s value to them, is relative to their numbers and desirability. If a particular pool includes many desirable dating partners, each member of the pool will evaluate any particular other member far more critically than if there are only a few desirable partners.³⁸

There is also the issue of rejection, and the fear of it. Seeking to

date partners whose PA is vastly greater than one's own is likely to elicit rejection. Similarly, despite high PA, people with low social status—a recent immigrant, for example, or someone with little education or an undesirable profession—may fear rejection by those of higher social status and seek dates with those of a social standing similar to their own. People make dating choices partly based on the probability of rejection. Thus, while most people would prefer to date very attractive others, because rejection is painful, they often choose someone of about their own PA level.³⁹

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If good looks are the leading basis for attraction in dating situations, where does that lead a couple whose looks have faded with

If good looks are the leading basis for attraction in dating situations, where does that lead a couple whose looks have faded with time?

time? Is PA as the means to launch a relationship a force strong enough to serve as the foundation for a lasting union of male and female?

“What need, when met, deposits the most love units in one's love bank?” asks Willard F. Harley, Jr., PhD, a psychologist and best-selling author. “If it's physical attractiveness, it should not be ignored,” continues Harley.

“For many, the need for physical attractiveness not only helps create a relationship, but it continues throughout marriage. Love units are deposited whenever the spouse is seen—*if* he or she is physically attractive.”⁴⁰

Some people say that they consider this need for physical attractiveness to be temporary and important only in the beginning of a relationship; others, according to Harley, suggest that those with a need for physical attractiveness are immature, spiritually weak, even lacking in human qualities. These might be the same people who quote Scripture as the answer to every human problem—and if so, good for them.

But Harley takes a dim view of those who denigrate the power of PA: “I don't judge important emotional needs, and I don't think you should, either. The question you should ask is, ‘How can I learn how to be an attractive spouse?’”⁴¹

During Harley's years of counseling married couples, "almost all" complaints voiced about loss of PA were based on relative corpulence. "When diet and exercise bring a spouse back to a healthy size, physical attractiveness almost always returns," he says, with a nod also to choices in clothing, hairstyle, makeup, and personal hygiene.

To end as we began, when it comes to finding the perfect mate, judging the book by the cover is anything but a myth. One study delving into this very subject should be required reading for anyone contemplating marriage or divorce. The study tracks longitudinal changes in values that people consider important for their life partners. After examining data on mate preferences collected in 1939, 1967, 1977, 1984–1985, and 1996, researchers detected major shifts. Between 1939 and 1996, for example, "both sexes increased the importance they attach to physical attractiveness in a mate." Specifically, in 1939, men ranked PA fourteenth on a list of eighteen desirable mate characteristics but eighth in 1996. For the same period, women's value of a prospective husband's PA jumped from seventeenth place to thirteenth.

The study's analysts decided that they could not identify with certainty the reasons for this shift, but they point to "the surge in visual media—television, movies, Internet images, and virtual reality"—as a likely cause.

As PA's importance in choosing an ideal mate grew, the study also found "a general decrease in the valuation of refinement, neatness, and chastity, for both men and women." For these researchers, the sharp decline in chastity's value as a factor in mate selection—it ranked tenth for men in 1939 but sixteenth in 1996—was "one of the most striking cultural changes." Chastity fared no better in women's hierarchy of values: Ranked tenth in 1939, it was next to last—seventeenth—in 1996.

"Clearly, the cultural value attached to virginity has declined over the past 57 years," say the researchers, who attribute the change to the "increased dissemination of birth control devices and the . . . sexual revolution of the 1960s."

The study examined what we Americans value in a life partner,

not what causes us to end a presumably lifelong commitment. But the findings require no great leap of suspicion to deduce the influential role of PA. It apparently serves to entice people to *read* the book and even to decide the value of the book's content along the way.⁴²

CHAPTER 3

As the Twig Is Bent: How Physical Attractiveness Affects Family Dynamics



*What smart parents know (or should know)
about PA*

All babies are beautiful.

But some babies are more beautiful than others, especially to their mothers.

A University of Texas study observed mothers interacting with their firstborn infants. The researchers concluded that the mothers of more attractive babies are more affectionate toward their offspring and play with them more often and longer than do the mothers of less attractive infants. A second study by the same researchers concluded that while every mother they observed displayed excellent parenting skills, the mothers of less attractive infants perceived their child as interfering more in their lives than did the mothers of

more attractive infants. In other words, even among good moms, the child's PA seems to influence maternal behavior.¹

These observations help explain why audiences laugh when comedian Tom Smothers whines to his more handsome brother Dick, "Mom always liked you best." It resonates with dimly understood but deeply felt childhood experiences.

Even among good moms, the child's PA seems to influence maternal behavior.

So, too, does the biblical story of twins Jacob and Esau. As recounted in Genesis 25:19–34, Esau, the older brother, came into the world covered with thick red hair, while

Jacob was so ordinary looking as a baby that he is not described at all. Ladies and gentlemen, boys and girls, can anyone think of a small mammal that has two arms, two legs, and is covered with short red fur? It's not hard to see why most mothers would have found Jacob more pleasing to the eye than his simian-like sibling Esau.

When the boys grew up, Esau became a skillful hunter and outdoorsman, while the mild-mannered Jacob "dwelled in tents." Isaac, who had a taste for wild game, favored Esau, but their mother, Rebecca, favored the gentler Jacob. When the time came for Isaac to choose which of his sons would inherit the family business, Rebecca schemed to substitute Jacob for Esau.

Whether one believes that this is God's literal truth, a divinely inspired parable, or merely a story plucked from ancient literature, Rebecca's choice is clear: She liked Jacob best, and while Esau roamed the countryside in search of wild animals to kill, Jacob spent quality time with Mom. The mantle of family leadership passed to Jacob, and in time he fulfilled his mother's genetic expectations by acquiring a quartet of wives and concubines with whom he sired a dozen sons and at least one daughter.

But why should a mother favor her better-looking child? Isn't every baby equally precious to its parents?

It seems not.

As discussed in Chapter 2, female human reproductive strategy requires parents to nurture babies and children until they are able to fend for themselves. From an evolutionary perspective, however, family planning is a very recent development. Until a generation

ago, when contraceptives became inexpensive and widely available, few mothers could choose how many children they would bear.

Inevitably, that raises a question: If parents have more than one child to raise, will they invest time and effort equally in all of them? Or do mothers devote more attention and family resources to those who would seem to have the best chance of surviving into maturity, finding a strong mate, and passing along their genes—which, of course, include those of their parents—to the next generation?

Social scientists have shown that parents indeed invest differently in each child, according to their perceived fitness, quality, reproductive potential, and not least, their physical attractiveness.² To make sure that the child or children most likely to reproduce survive into adulthood, parents devote more familial resources and personal energy to those siblings who are more attractive.³ Since PA is an indication of quality and overall health, parents—especially mothers—give their most attractive children better treatment than less attractive offspring by offering more and better attention.⁴

Some researchers even propose that it follows that children with high PA, perhaps because they have more and better parental care, tend to have better traits and exhibit better and more socialized behavior than do children with less PA.⁵

But parents are not the only adults who give better-looking babies preferential attention, care, and nurturing. Another famous study, also done by University of Texas (Austin) researchers, showed that most adults' expectations of infants are based on their perceived PA, rather than on the baby's actual capabilities.⁶

Aside from their mothers, most newborn American babies get their initial care from hospital nurses. If these nurses are among the first to interact with an infant, it stands to reason that infant-nurse interactions are crucial to each baby's development. Most adults treat more attractive babies better than less attractive ones. When it comes to newborn babies, however, nurses have both training and experience far beyond the average adult. Do nurses apply an equal standard of care to all infants in their charge?

Some researchers even propose that it follows that children with high PA tend to have better traits and exhibit better and more socialized behavior than do children with less PA.

Perhaps not. A 1993 study showed that nurses had a marked preference for healthy infants with normal birth weights. It is widely accepted that an infant's PA is a reliable indicator of how long it will require hospitalization and how quickly it will gain weight. A more recent 2001 study even suggests that the rate of weight gain and decreased length of hospitalization for attractive infants was at least partly a result of their receiving more nurturing care from nurses.⁷

To find out how nurses distribute care among newborn babies with different levels of PA, researchers Janel Rae Crowder and Laurie Sullivan Hunter at South Carolina's Francis Marion University studied the responses of eighty-five nursing students between nineteen and fifty-two years of age; their median age was twenty-nine. The researchers also sought to find out if nursing students' perceptions of infant attractiveness were affected by the wealth and social status of a baby's parents, by the infant's gender and health at birth, and by the student's individual experience in the nursing field.

After being shown photos of infants coded for physical attractiveness, the nursing students were asked to indicate how much time during a normal eight-hour shift they would spend with the infant in the photo and then with each of two other infants who were not described at all.

The results: Nurses perceived an infant's PA in relation to its gender and its health at birth. Boys of normal health at birth were perceived as more attractive than those of low health at birth, but no significant findings were discovered for this variable in female infants; students seemed to expect males to be resilient and hardy while girls were often perceived as naturally delicate and fragile. The nursing students deemed smaller girl infants the most attractive, while the opposite was true for boy infants: The bulkiest and most muscular were perceived as more attractive and healthy.⁸

And how did nursing experience affect these perceptions? Did more seasoned nurses learn to overcome their natural bias toward less attractive infants?

Quite the contrary: The least experienced nurses, those who had never worked in a neonatal ward, reported that they would spend significantly less time with an attractive infant (the median time was 175.70 minutes). That compares to a more experienced group of

nurses with one field clinical rotation, whose median time with attractive infants was reported as 250.01 minutes.⁹ The most experienced nursing students also said that they would spend more time with a normal-health-at-birth infant (median time: 250.67 minutes) than with a low-health-at-birth infant (median time: 197.50 minutes).

Within minutes of birth, infants in most U.S. hospitals are subjected to a clinical assessment of their heart rate, muscle tone, respiratory effort, color, and reflex responsiveness. The results, collectively, are called the “Apgar” score. Crowder and Hunter concluded from their findings that infants with low health at birth and a low Apgar score got *less* nursing attention and nurturing time than those with normal health at birth and a normal Apgar score. They suspected that additional nurturing bestowed by nurses on the more physically attractive infants led to increased rates of weight gain, which resulted in shorter hospital stays. “Perhaps if ‘at-risk’ infants received a more nurturing environment, they would also have an increased rate of weight gain and a decreased length of time in the hospital,” wrote the researchers.¹⁰

But what about the babies? Do they perceive the same sort of beauty as adults, or do they find Mom beautiful simply because they’re hungry and she’s their own private Meals on Wheels?

According to studies in the University of Texas Langlois Social Development Lab, infants from two to six months of age prefer to look longer at faces rated as attractive by adults than at faces rated as unattractive by adults. Assessing babies’ preferences for male and female Caucasian adult faces, African American adult female faces, and Caucasian infant faces, researchers concluded that one-year-olds prefer to approach and play with a “stranger” (but *not* a parent or family member) with an attractive face. In contrast, when a stranger is unattractive, babies withdraw from them more often—offering the real possibility that a very ugly person could cause a baby to cry merely by the sight of them. More to the point, it seems that infants prefer the same types of faces as adults.¹¹

Moreover, as babies grow older, their judgments of facial attractiveness reflect perceptions of their own parents’ age and characteristics. The child of a couple in their thirties, for example, tends to see

more beauty in older faces than does a child born to parents in their twenties.

This finding comes from a team of researchers at the School of Psychology of the University of St Andrews in Scotland. Building on research that showed that in many species, mate preferences are shaped by an infant's experience of parental characteristics, the researchers used computer graphics to create faces for children to examine. They found that "women born to 'old' parents (over age 30) were less impressed by youth and more attracted to age cues in male faces than women with 'young' parents (under age 30). For men, preferences for female faces were influenced by their mother's age and not their father's age, *but only for long-term relationships*" (emphasis added).¹²

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If young children can distinguish between beautiful faces and not-so-attractive ones, and if they prefer to look at the former, do they also link beauty with other favorable human qualities? To a child, does a person's PA suggest someone is a good person?

To a child, does a person's PA suggest someone is a good person?

According to studies at the University of Texas, Austin, that is indeed the case. As children grow older, as stereotypes about attractiveness shape their interactions with others, they tend to choose peers and friends based on PA and the traits they feel this condition of attractiveness denotes in other children.

Attractive children are liked more, are seen as smarter, and are rated higher on sharing and friendliness and lower on meanness and hitting than are less attractive children. This is equally the case for children who know each other and for those who do not. Studies of young children show that given a choice, they will select prospective playmates on the basis of their PA.¹³

So mothers spend more and better time with their better-looking offspring, nurses give more attention and nurturing to the cuter babies on their ward, and kids prefer more attractive playmates to less attractive ones, whether they are previously acquainted with each other or not. Are these the only childhood advantages for good-looking children?

Not a chance. A study by renowned social scientist Karen K. Dion at the University of Minnesota in 1972 showed that when kids misbehave and must be disciplined, being more attractive usually means escaping the harshest punishment of all, the stigma of lowered expectations.

Dion, then a graduate student, set up her experiment by giving written information about severe classroom disruptions by seven-year-olds to undergraduate women volunteers. The child's supposed lapse in behavior was either mild or severe, and along with the description of behavior came a photo of the kid's face. Some photos were of exceptionally attractive children, others of comparatively unattractive kids.

After reading the "transgression" information and viewing the child's photo, the test subjects completed a questionnaire that assessed the following:

1. The likelihood that the child had done a similar thing in the past
2. The likelihood that the child would do a similar thing in the future
3. The undesirability of the reported transgression
4. The level of punishment the child should receive

Test subjects were also asked to rate the child on the dimensions of their personality traits.

Dion suspected that the results of her study would show that:

1. An attractive child who committed the same transgression as an unattractive child would be judged less likely to exhibit chronic antisocial behavior.
2. An attractive child's transgression would be perceived as less socially undesirable than the same transgression by an unattractive child.

3. The suggested punishment would be less intense for an attractive child than for an unattractive child who committed the same offense.

And that's almost what happened: The subjects tended to blame disruptive behavior on the ugly children, saying that it was easy to see that they were "brats." When the photo showed a beautiful child, however, the test subjects tended to excuse the child's behavior.

Thus, an attractive child's severe transgression was less likely to be seen as a display of chronic antisocial behavior than an equally severe offense by an unattractive child. Mild or severe antisocial behavior by an attractive child was rated as less socially undesirable than the same act by an unattractive child.

The study contained one surprise: Study subjects recommended exactly the same punishments for all children, without regard to PA.

Less surprising, the students rated high-PA kids as more honest and more pleasant than unattractive children who had committed an identical offense.

Dion's study has been widely cited because its results are both strong in evidence and provocative in conclusions, which violate widely held ideals of fairness about evaluating others based on a subject's facial attractiveness. Subsequent studies, however, have validated these findings.¹⁴

In a related study, Dion and her colleagues showed college students photos of attractive children, average children, and unattractive children and asked their test subjects to rate some twenty-seven personality traits. As expected, the attractive people received the most positive ratings.¹⁵

Such stereotypical first impressions are not, of course, limited to evaluations by adults of children. Lieutenant Robert FitzRoy, Royal Navy, believed that personality is shown in facial characteristics. In 1831, when FitzRoy was skipper of HMS *Beagle*, a surveying ship, he interviewed a young Anglican minister for the post of naturalist. It was not the candidate's qualifications that gave him pause, but his face; FitzRoy thought that Charles Darwin's oversize nose was a sure sign of a sluggish personality. Fortunately, he was willing to

overlook this presumed trait, perhaps because what he really wanted was an educated man who would listen quietly to his own rambling monologues about life and navy service.¹⁶

Children learn about PA stereotypes in many ways, including the behavior of parents and siblings. Other, less obvious sources are the fairy tales and stories that generations of children hear as very young children.

Such stories as *Cinderella*, *Hansel and Gretel*, and *Snow White* are filled with messages about beauty and evil. Beauty, these stories tell children, is inherently good and merits reward, while ugly people are wicked, evil, and mean. And that's not all. A 2003 study by Lori Baker-Sperry, an assistant professor at Western Illinois University, and Liz Grauerholz, associate professor of sociology at Purdue University, revealed patterns of fairy tale association between beauty and economic privilege, beauty and race, beauty and goodness, and beauty and danger.

According to Baker-Sperry, “As the only study to offer a historical analysis of the reproduction of a beauty ideal in fairy tales, this research provides critical insight into ways in which children’s literature has been shaped by political and social forces over time and yet continues to provide traditional-gendered prescriptions for women. The messages presented in the Grimms’ tales portray differing means of status attainment for men and for women, especially white, heterosexual women.” She adds, “The pervasiveness of fairy tales in our society, through books and movies, suggest that there are many opportunities for these messages to become internalized.”

An attractive child’s severe transgression was less likely to be seen as a display of chronic antisocial behavior than an equally severe offense by an unattractive child.

“Parents need to be aware that all literature is teaching children something,” writes study coauthor Grauerholz. “You need to raise questions and have a dialogue with your children about the meaning of these fairy tales. I didn’t want my daughters to think they were only valuable for their looks,” adds Grauerholz, explaining why she discusses such tales with her children.¹⁷

Grauerholz and Baker-Sperry analyzed 168 fairy tales by Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm—the “Brothers Grimm.” About half these

tales from the nineteenth century have found their way into contemporary children's books and movies, including *Cinderella*, *Snow White*, *Sleeping Beauty* (originally titled *Briar Rose*), *Little Red Riding Hood*, and *Hansel and Gretel*.

The study found references to PA in 94 percent of the stories, with an average of nearly fourteen such references per story. References to female beauty far outnumbered male references. And the PA-challenged fare very poorly in the Grimms' tales; almost one in five stories make a connection between ugly appearance and evil acts, including many stories describing awful punishments suffered by the wicked uglies.

So, should discerning parents consign these venerable fairy tales to the trash heap, or offer their children another point of view and help them to think about the hidden messages in the stories? Is reading a child a story loaded with hidden symbolic meaning and then urging the child to think about it another way all that different from telling a lie on the TV news and then granting the subject of the lie equal time to respond—when the denial itself may lend credibility to the lie?

A better way might be to learn to think like a Hollywood producer: When circumstances dictate, change the characters, keep the story. Or keep the characters and lose the story. Or both.

Grauerholz concurs. For children too young to read, fix the stories, she says. Make Cinderella a boy, or alter the story's ending so that she decides there's too much of a downside to hooking up with a handsome prince; with her newly minted self-esteem, she knows how to live happily ever after by moving out of her stepmother's house and taking charge of her own life.

Baker-Sperry also thinks that, even for young children, the feminine beauty ideal espoused by fairy tales can provide insight into the dynamic relationship between gender, power, and culture, as well as the cultural and social significance of beauty to women's lives.

But aren't PA messages in fairy tales different from the messages received from television, movies, books, and other popular media? Robin Goodman, a psychologist at New York University's Child Study Center, thinks not. "Media advertising, pop stars, TV, peer interaction—there are so many things" that all reinforce PA and

other stereotypes.¹⁸ But, as Goodman points out, not every message in every fairy tale example is negative. In *Beauty and the Beast*, the heroine learns to love the Beast for who he is, not what he looks like.

The ever more pervasive effects of media images on children are not limited to American kids. In this age of globalization, when people in every nation are exposed to mass media images from around the globe, adolescents—and many adults—often attempt to model their own bodies or those of their children on what they have come to believe are ideal—if unattainable—images.

Take, for example, sixteen-year-old Santi. She has three “best friends” who, she says, each weighs less than 110 pounds. “They look so slim, so confident,” complains Santi. “I’m the only one whose weight is above 110, and it makes me feel left out.”¹⁹ Santi weighs 114 pounds and is five-feet-three-inches tall.

Just another teen who watches too much TV and reads too many fashion publications? Guess again.

“I never saw myself as fat until the day my cousin and my mom told me so,” Santi says. “The problem is not magazines or television, because I know it’s not real. People are supposed to be thin and beautiful there. But when you hear it from your own parents, then it hurts.”

Santi takes diet pills to dull her appetite and eats little more than apples, hoping to reach her goal of 103 pounds, so she can have “a body like a fashion model.”

“The current younger generation already has their own concept of an ideal body image,” says Dr. Evi Sukmaningrum, an Atma Jaya University (Jakarta, Indonesia) psychologist. And, most disturbing to many people, teens such as Santi “are being pressured to be thin, not only from the magazines and television, but most of all, from their family and friends.”²⁰

While she may eventually realize that her eating habits are unhealthy and that she’s overdoing the diet routine, the issue is not that simple. Stringent dieting to reach a weight target may eventually develop into serious eating disorders such as anorexia nervosa and bulimia that can become life threatening. Moreover, strict dieting in adolescence can lead to serious health problems such as

dehydration and irregular menstrual periods. Santi's use of diet pills could even lead to heart disease.

"Adolescent girls need [proper] nutrition for [development of] their hormones," explains Sukmaningrum, suggesting that even truly overweight girls should never starve themselves. Far better, she says, to cut food intake slightly and exercise more. "The most important thing is for parents to make sure that their children follow a smart and healthy living pattern, instead of focusing on an unhealthy body image," adds Sukmaningrum.²¹

You'll find much more about eating disorders in Chapter 9, which includes a discussion of the extremes to which some people will go in pursuit of a "perfect body image." When it comes to children, however, parents and peers should avoid pressuring children to emulate models and actresses, especially when their bodies are still on the path to finding their ultimate form. For too many adolescents, a thin body is not a sign of good health but of unwise nutrition.

CHAPTER 4

Readin', 'Ritin', 'Rithmetic, 'n' Ridicule



*How PA influences teachers, students, success,
failure, and the learning experience*

Mamas and papas do it. Neonatal nurses do it. So how 'bout teachers? When it comes to handing out choice grades, extracurricular assignments, and other school perks, will a pedagogue prime better-looking students at the expense of those less attractive?

Bet the farm that they will. Studies by University of Hawaii psychologist Elaine Hatfield and Illinois State University sociologist Susan Sprecher demonstrated that most teachers *expect* better-looking kids to perform better, and they devote more attention to children they think have greater potential.¹

And because most school principals, administrators, and counselors cut their professional teeth in the classroom, they, too, have

higher expectations for attractive students. Just like teachers, most expect cuter kids to perform better than their less attractive classmates.

But then a funny thing happens on the way to graduation. Because a teacher or counselor *expects* a particular pupil to do better, very often the student actually does: The thought becomes the deed.²

Most teachers *expect* better-looking kids to perform better, and they devote more attention to children they think have greater potential.

Dr. Robert Rosenthal at Harvard pioneered work in this field some fifty years ago; it came as a result of a ruined experiment that was intended to complete his own doctoral dissertation. “It appeared that I might have treated my experimental subjects in such a way as to lead them to respond in accordance with my experi-

mental hypothesis, or expectancy,” he would later write.³

After assessing where his methods went wrong, Rosenthal realized that he had unwittingly raised a question to which no good answer yet existed: Do the *expectations* of a psychological researcher affect the *outcomes* of his laboratory experiments?

If they do, and if Rosenthal’s own “unconscious experimenter bias” had led to the puzzling and disconcerting results of his dissertation experiment, then, he reasoned, he could reproduce this phenomenon in his own lab.

A career was launched.

Rosenthal’s first studies were conducted with students who were told to rate photographs of people. Half the experimenters were led to expect high ratings and half were led to expect low ratings. Over several studies, those who expected high ratings obtained substantially higher ratings than did those expecting low ratings.⁴

To see if a researcher’s expectations would influence the outcome of other kinds of research subjects, Rosenthal and his colleagues set up two more studies that involved laboratory animals. Half the experimenters were told that their rats had been specially bred to perform well in a maze or in a Skinner box (a device used to teach conditioned responses). The others were instructed that their test rats had been specially bred for *poor* performance. Both

studies showed that when experimenters *expected* better learning, their lab rats did not disappoint them: They indeed learned better.⁵

If a whiskered rodent becomes brighter merely because a guy in a white coat expects smarter behavior, could a child do the same? Would a kid demonstrate higher intelligence just because his teacher expects it?

To find out, in 1968 Rosenthal and a colleague created yet another study whose findings were published as a book, *Pygmalion in the Classroom*. Each child in a school was given a nonverbal test of intelligence disguised as a test to predict intellectual “bloomings.” To hide the study’s true purpose, the test was given a bogus name: “The Harvard Test of Inflected Acquisition.” The school where this experiment was conducted had eighteen classrooms, three for each of six grade levels. Every classroom included children with above-average ability, average ability, and below-average ability, respectively. Rosenthal randomly selected about 20 percent of the student body as his experimental group. Teachers were told by the distinguished Harvard researcher that certain selected children’s scores on the test indicated that each of those children would show a surprising spurt in intellectual competence during the next eight months of the school term. Because the children were chosen randomly, however, the only real difference between the small experimental group and the much larger control group was in their teachers’ minds.

Eight months later, every child in the school was retested with the same nonverbal intelligence test. The teachers had been led to expect greater intellectual gains from certain children, and those children in fact showed significantly more progress than those in the control group, thereby supporting what Rosenthal dubbed his “Pygmalion hypothesis.”⁶

Rosenthal’s groundbreaking research was only the beginning; in the years since his “Pygmalion in the classroom” study was published, literally hundreds of other experiments were conducted in this field. Many of these experiments were conducted in classrooms, but others took place in nursing homes, business environments, and courtrooms.

Rosenthal’s data led him to conclude that in almost any business

organization, efficiency is increased by raising managers' expectations. Juries will more often return a "guilty" verdict when instructed by a judge who believes a defendant to be guilty. Depression in nursing home residents is ameliorated by raising their caretakers' expectations of what patients are capable of achieving. And, to return to the theme of this chapter, not only in the United States but in other nations as well, teachers' expectations of student abilities very often serve as self-fulfilling prophecies, and these expectations may encompass far more than the purely intellectual tasks associated with classrooms.⁷

So how does it work? What goes on between a kid's ears that pumps up smarts?

To find out, Robert Hartley carried out a 1986 study into the problem-solving abilities of a group of disadvantaged children. These were kids who had been found to be impulsive, poor planners who rarely checked over their work for mistakes before handing it in for grading.

When these children were asked to "act like someone who is very clever," however, their test scores shot up significantly. Why? Hartley's study revealed that children don't perform at peak ability by default: Motivational factors affect the degree to which they apply themselves to a task and ultimately how well they perform it. His study also showed that when children who view themselves as low performers step out of this role and assume that of a "clever person," they then apply themselves to the task more effectively and thus attain higher scores. This is the root of a philosophical notion called *constructive alternativism* that posits that all human perception is inherently subjective, and that reality in the form of events or people may be construed in different ways. Thus, one's understanding of situations and people, no less than of oneself, are *subjective* constructs that affect how we behave.⁸

So, what's wrong with teachers positively influencing a student's achievement by raising expectations of performance?

In itself, nothing. But when it comes to physical attractiveness, the Pygmalion phenomenon has an ugly downside: discrimination against those with less PA. Sometimes termed "lookism," it exerts

a corrosive effect on self-esteem that can adversely affect children for the rest of their often unhappy lives.

Is this a secret? Ask “Peanuts” creator Charles Schulz, widely considered as history’s greatest cartoonist and an astute if untutored observer of juvenile behavior. He once drew a strip featuring Peppermint Patty complaining to Franklin that she failed a school test because “I have a big nose . . . sometimes a teacher just doesn’t like the way a kid looks.” Franklin then examines her test paper; it’s blank. “If a teacher doesn’t like your looks, Franklin, there’s nothing you can do,” she sighs, a truth as plain to Patty as the nose on her freckled face.

Science confirms that, typically, a teacher’s first impressions of and reaction to a new pupil are influenced by that child’s overall physical characteristics—so less than physically attractive children enter this vital learning relationship with at least one strike against them.⁹

Many studies have addressed teacher-student bias against less attractive students. Elementary school teachers, for example, associate attractive students with higher IQ, popularity, likely progression in school, and parental interest. Given what we have learned about

PA’s powerful effects, this finding should not be surprising—except that even when attractive and unattractive students earn identical records, teachers will *still* believe that in the future, attractive students will do better than unattractive students. Moreover, even *outside* academic-related areas, teachers lower their social expectations for unattractive students.¹⁰

It is shocking, but physically attractive students are often punished only minimally for disciplinary infractions; when less attractive classmates break the same rules, however, their punishment is often more severe than that meted out to better-looking students. In other words, teachers punish children for not looking beautiful!¹¹

Children are even more susceptible to the power of PA than adults. As we learned in Chapter 3, the renowned social science team of Karen Dion, Ellen Berscheid, and Elaine Walster conducted

Science confirms that, typically, a teacher’s first impressions of and reaction to a new pupil are influenced by that child’s overall physical characteristics.

a now-famous study at the University of Minnesota in 1972 that continues to serve as a basis for much research into the PA phenomenon. The sum of its findings is described by its title: “What is beautiful is good.”

In their seminal experiment, Dion, Berscheid, and Walster asked college psychology students to view photos of people and then evaluate their personality traits. Each student opened envelopes containing pictures, respectively, of a person with high PA, one of average PA, and a person almost entirely lacking in PA. The pictures were evenly divided between male and female, but each participant was given photos of only one gender. Students opened one envelope at a time, then rated the person inside on twenty-seven different personality traits. They then used these photos to decide who would be most likely to possess certain quality-of-life characteristics such as marital happiness and social and professional happiness. Finally, the students were asked to decide who they thought would be most likely to enter into each of twenty-seven different professions.

Results indicated that favorable personality and most quality-of-life traits were more often attributed to the highly attractive than to the unattractive; highly attractive people, however, were *not* assumed to make better parents. Gender showed no effect on these results.

Six years later another team of researchers led by Terrance Dushenko built on these findings with two research studies on PA as it relates to age and sex. In one group, the study participants were children aged 10 to 12; the other group was adults aged 55 to 75. The objective was to determine if the strength of the beauty-is-good stereotype varied with age. Participants were presented with pictures of an attractive and an unattractive woman and asked to decide which would display each of nine different personality traits and five quality-of-life elements. While both groups conformed to the beauty-is-good stereotype, children were much more likely to attribute positive characteristics to attractive people than were adults.¹²

In other words, kids react to good-looking adults with all the enthusiasm of a hummingbird sipping nectar—but by the time they acquire serious responsibilities, gray hair, and aching joints, life has

taught them that everything that sparkles is not a diamond, that the man from the government is not necessarily there to help you, and that golden tresses are no guarantee of a sterling character. That tiny peep into human nature is the foundation for generations of movie plots, from *She Done Him Wrong* to *The Bad and the Beautiful* to *Catwoman*, all playing to ever-younger audiences.

A year after the Dushenko study, pioneer University of Texas researcher Judith Langlois tested the beauty-is-good stereotype with preschool and second- and fourth-grade children. These kids were shown pictures of attractive and unattractive classmates and asked to decide which they liked and which would be most likely to demonstrate prosocial, antisocial, and socially competent behaviors.

Langlois concluded that attractive girls became increasingly popular as the age of the rater increased. If, however, the rater was over five years old, attractive *boys* became *decreasingly* popular. Overall, unattractive boys were more popular than attractive boys, the reverse of the findings for girls. By age eight, however, *all* attractive peers were better liked than were unattractive peers.¹³

That attractive females were more popular than attractive males was confirmed four years later by another University of Texas study. Children aged 4 or 5 chose three classmates that they “especially liked” from an array of previously rated photos. This study showed that they were more likely to choose attractive than unattractive peers, especially if the peers were girls. While PA was not always an accurate predictor of popularity among boys, researchers also noted that at the start of the school year, when the children in the study were first assessed, it was. By the end of the year, however, this was no longer the case, suggesting that children’s initial social perceptions and preferences are PA based.¹⁴ In other words, the more PA a person has, the more likely it is that a child will associate them with positive traits and like them. How they later interact with each other, of course, influences the basis of further friendship.

But how do children come by these behaviors? A 1987 study by Murray Krantz sought to examine the PA dimension of social choices made by kids entering kindergarten. Individual photos were taken just before the school year; children viewed pictures of classmates and were asked to select those they would like to have as

friends. Meanwhile, their mothers were asked to predict which classmates they thought their own child would pick as friends. Five weeks into the school year, the kindergartners were asked to nominate three best friends of their own sex, then rate their remaining same-sex peers. Krantz's results indicated that PA accurately predicts choice of friends among same-sex peers, although mothers and daughters were more likely to use PA in choosing friends and boys placed no emphasis on PA when choosing male friends.¹⁵ Other results of this study suggest that parents play an important role in the development of their child's perceptions.

Are there other factors that influence children's formulation of concepts of what is physically attractive and what is not? According to the eminent social psychology pioneer Albert Bandura, widely known as the "Father of the Cognitive Theory," social behaviors are learned through observing and imitating the behaviors that children observe most frequently: that of parents, teachers, and, nowadays, television programs. If a child perceives that the physically attractive are associated with goodness and treated better than the unattractive, the child will adopt this behavior as his own.¹⁶ And so it goes, from one generation to the next.

Children as young as eight take it upon themselves to restrict their dietary intakes because of concern for their own body image.

In a 1980 follow-up study, researchers sought to unravel the interacting perceptions of parents, teachers, and children toward the beauty-is-good stereotype. They showed children and their parents photographic sets of other children and of middle-aged people. The results indicated that parents and teachers expect their own children to make positive attributions and have preferences for attractive as opposed to unattractive male children. While parents did not expect that girls' photographs would be judged on the basis of their relative PA, children made their assessments based on the beauty-is-good stereotype without regard to gender,¹⁷ suggesting that youngsters are predisposed to expect certain behaviors from attractive versus unattractive peers.

Bandura's social learning theory posits that because parents and

teachers play such an important role in children's lives, they are a possible cause for this predisposition.¹⁸

So it should be no surprise that schoolchildren, picking up on teachers' behavior, soon learn to emulate their elders. Indeed, children as young as three years are aware of such physical attributes as weight and use body dimensions and type to match or categorize individuals.¹⁹

By age five, many children are sensitive to different body types and show a preference for normal weight and build. These youngsters have also developed body-image stereotypes about other children. Even very young children may hold negative views about physical categories to which they do not belong. Children who are of average size or are muscular are seen as happy, kind, smart, neat, strong, and popular. Plump children, however, are perceived as sloppy, lazy, stupid, and likely to cheat. Thin children are considered to be fearful or worried, weak, and lonely. By the time they are six to eight years old, gender differences often appear; girls show more dissatisfaction with their bodies than do boys, more frequently believe that being thin equates to being likable, and thus show more desire to "be thinner" even when their weight is normal.²⁰

Small wonder, then, that children as young as eight take it upon themselves to restrict their dietary intakes because of concern for their own body image.²¹

Of all the reasons that a schoolchild in early twenty-first-century America may be seen as unattractive, the leading reason is obesity, which has become a national plague: Two-thirds of Americans are either overweight or obese, including a significant percentage of morbidly obese. Obesity now rivals cigarette smoking as a source of premature death.²²

As frightening as that is, it gets worse: Children between six and eleven years of age are *three* times as likely to be overweight as they were in 1970, according to Centers for Disease Control statistics.

For those who manage to survive childhood, despite the often severe medical problems associated with obesity, including diabetes and heart disease, growing up with the stigma of unattractiveness may scar their psyches for life. People with early-onset childhood

obesity show a greater frequency of psychiatric symptoms as well as higher degrees of psychological distress and symptomatology than subjects who became obese as adults.²³

It's not that being fat makes you crazy. It's just that less attractive kids, especially the chubby ones, too often become lightning rods for classmate ridicule and teasing, not to mention teachers' prejudices. Sometimes educators even project the dissatisfaction they feel for their own bodies onto students and may suggest that an overweight student diet or pursue fitness activities.²⁴

Kids may shrug off the immediate effects of this cruelty, but they tend to internalize adult and peer criticism, which contributes to development of a poor self-image. Overweight students are very aware of their bodies; often they share the same biases toward obesity harbored by their classmates of average weight: namely, that they are lazy, stupid, sloppy, and ugly.

Because peer pressures exert tremendous influences on impressionable young minds, biases experienced in childhood often exert negative influences into adulthood and beyond—even if an overweight child grows into a mature adult of normal weight and average body shape. Some research into the consequences of obesity indicates that overweight young adults remain single more often and have lower household incomes than their average-weight peers.²⁵

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Despite its lifetime effects, schoolroom bias toward the less attractive—and toward obese children in particular—seems to have become accepted societal practice.

This is no longer the case with bullying, partly because of its spectacularly tragic consequences. On April 20, 1999, twelve students and a teacher were murdered and twenty-three others wounded in a rampage at Columbine High School in Littleton, Colorado. The shooters, Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold, both Columbine students, then took their own lives. Columbine, alas, was but the bloodiest of a dozen similar shootings during an eighteen-month period in schools from Alaska to Georgia. In each case, the

shooters were students, some as young as eleven, who had been bullied because of their physical appearance.

How common is bullying? A 2000 CNN poll of 558 students in a Midwestern middle school found that within the previous thirty days, 80 percent of those questioned admitted to behavior that included physical aggression, social ridicule, teasing, name-calling, and issuing of threats. And being overweight is named, by both boys and girls, as among the five most common reasons for being bullied. Physical weakness is the number-one reason boys say they are picked on by their peers.²⁶

Alarmed at how common and destructive bullying suddenly seemed, in 2000 James R. Whitehead and John H. Hoover of the University of North Dakota reviewed scientific literature on this phenomenon, looking for trends or solutions to the problem. Their conclusions echoed that of one of psychiatry's most venerated figures, Dr. Alfred Adler, a student of Sigmund Freud, who in 1932 wrote that "[n]umerous children grow up in the constant dread of being laughed at. Ridicule of children is well-nigh criminal. It retains its effect on the soul of the child, and is transferred into the habits and actions of his adulthood."²⁷

Whitehead and Hoover, however, went beyond Adler's observations to link bullying and other behavioral problems with body issues. They found that while at any given time about 60 percent of American women and girls eleven years and older will admit to being on a diet, nearly as many sixth graders of both genders want to weigh less, and one in six had dieted to shed what they considered extra poundage.²⁸

Moreover, for both genders, adolescence is both a critical period in emotional development and a time of dramatic physical change as their bodies change shape during puberty. For some teenagers, especially those with depression, this change proves to be a difficult task, and usually it is more difficult for girls than boys, as girls are more concerned about attractiveness and less satisfied with their appearance to begin with.²⁹

In Columbine and a dozen similar shootings during an eighteen-month period, the shooters were students, some as young as eleven, who had been bullied because of their physical appearance.

Asked to choose from a list of body areas, teenage girls, including many who were normal weight or thin, expressed concern that their thighs, buttocks, and hips were too large. Younger girls, however, are far less likely to select areas of sexual attractiveness but are instead dissatisfied with such body parts as teeth, face, and feet,³⁰ suggesting that the onset of puberty produces changes in body image.

In response to the burden of coping with these adolescent body changes in an atmosphere where PA issues weigh so heavily, more adolescents, and especially girls, experience depression. Depressed girls typically experience their body as less pretty, less interesting, sicker, weaker, clumsier, less useful, less familiar, and more out of control. Depressed girls are particularly dissatisfied with the look of their faces, a primary basis of social judgments on female PA, and with weight, a major determinant of overall body image.³¹

To find out if the pressures that drive young women and girls to be unhappy with their weight and the shape of their bodies come from inner sources—some innate sense that being heavy is wrong or unhealthy—or from experiencing feedback from others, Vanderbilt University psychologists Leslie Morey and Dennis Morey conducted an experiment in 1991. Their subjects, female university students, were asked to estimate their own body weight. Individuals also rated their own level of depression by answering questions on a highly validated test, while their self-estimation of body image was recorded in their choice of comparative body images. In an initial session, subjects were weighed in pounds on a digital scale. In the second session, they were weighed on a scale that read in kilograms. Each participant was randomly assigned a bogus weight either 3 percent lighter or heavier than their true weight.

Morey and Morey found that body estimations of participants who had low feelings of depression were not affected by this weight-related feedback. Highly depressed women, however, became even more depressed by it. The scientists concluded that depressed women are more vulnerable to external feedback.³² This finding suggests and supports other research that indicates people who are already depressed are driven to further depths of desperation by external images, including idealized media images.³³

While Whitehead and Hoover found widespread evidence of

negative self-perception related to physical size and appearance, they also found significant ethnic differences. For example, in a study of eating disorder symptoms in girls aged 11 to 16, white girls' dissatisfaction with their bodies increased with age—but the desire to become thinner remained relatively constant in black girls of the same age. While black girls were more vulnerable to developing binge-type eating disorders, white girls were more likely to develop such dietary conditions as anorexia.³⁴

Regardless of ethnicity, overweight kids who suffered from decreasing self-esteem were far more likely to be sad, lonely, and nervous than children of normal weight. And if that wasn't worrisome enough, children with low self-esteem are more likely to smoke cigarettes and drink alcohol.³⁵

Paradoxically, other studies suggest that attractiveness may also be risky. Women college students with especially pretty faces are at risk for eating disorders if their perfectionism combines with anxiety and hypercriticality. And women are more likely to criticize thin women for their efforts to stay slim.³⁶

Far from being prophets of doom, however, Whitehead and Hoover offer hope for the bullied. Their magic wand is no mystery: The most successful prevention and treatment programs combine diet and exercise within a framework of significant behavior change. These programs, they say, should be devised and implemented in coordinated fashion with schools, families, and primary care physicians.

Whitehead and Hoover caution, however, that it has often proved difficult for schools to maintain such programs. Budgetary limitations and competition for curriculum time make adequate teacher supervision difficult over the long run. Nevertheless, physical education (PE) programs that take into account individual children's needs and sensibilities may serve as a "thread" to reconnect alienated children with caring adults. Moreover, other studies show that physical activity and exercise are just as effective in treating depression as pharmacological interventions—and better than psychotherapy.³⁷

Paradoxically, women college students with especially pretty faces are at risk for eating disorders if their perfectionism combines with anxiety and hypercriticality.

But PE programs that actually support those who need it most or children with special physical needs are rarely available in America's public schools anymore. Paradoxically, while educators routinely preach the gospel of fitness and lifelong activity, in practice they often discriminate against the most needy youngsters—the overweight and sedentary. Most schools tailor PE programs to support the most physically gifted students; physical education courses are too often merely feeder systems for interscholastic athletics. And yet it is precisely in physical education classes where individual physiques emerge from camouflaging clothing and body issues become most vexing to the overweight and less attractive of both genders. Many PE departments serve no student's needs quite so well as they do in providing employment opportunities to coaches.³⁸

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Another way that physical attractiveness warps the learning experiences of the young is its impact on sexuality. Adolescent psychological and behavioral problems are often traced to a teen's desire to attract the opposite sex. Early and often unhealthy sexual adventures, for example, may be manifestations of a different sort of desire: to have one's physical attractiveness validated by the opposite sex.³⁹

A healthier way to get that sort of validation is through participation in sports. A study of 176 girls of high school age explored links between involvement in organized sports, functional body orientation, and self-empowerment. The study concluded that girls who participate in high school team sports are far more likely to avoid the sort of risky sexual behavior that leads to unwanted pregnancy or sexually transmitted diseases.⁴⁰

No matter how many previous sexual partners a man or woman had been with, the more attractive a presumed new sexual partner was, the less inclined students were to take safe-sex precautions.

As children grow into and beyond adolescence, however, PA issues continue to warp their still-maturing judgments about sexual matters, as demonstrated in a study that showed how the PA of a supposed new sexual partner affects decisions about the use of condoms and other safer-sex practices. For

this study, 280 college students (140 of each gender) were shown photos and provided with “biographic information” that included sexual histories of possible sex partners. Students then completed a questionnaire predicated on the assumption that the person in the photo was willing to have sex with them. The results showed that in making judgments about risk and probable future behavior with this person, most participants—but especially men—relied on PA and tended to ignore sexual history information. In short, no matter how many previous sexual partners a man or woman had been with, and no matter what kind of risky previous sexual behavior they had participated in, the more attractive a presumed new sexual partner was, the less inclined students were to take safe-sex precautions.⁴¹

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We’ve seen that teachers invest the most effort in good-looking pupils, that students pick up on adult behavior and seek friendships with their cuter classmate—thereby creating schoolwide popularity hierarchies based on PA—and that those with the misfortune to be born less attractive are saddled with heavier burdens in competing for an education.

But what about student attitudes toward good-looking versus “ugly” teachers?

There was a time, not so distant, when as long as a pedagogue appeared in the classroom promptly, dressed appropriately, didn’t molest a student or a colleague, and turned grades in on time, America’s school boards and the trustees of its institutions of higher education did not much care what students might think of their teachers. Today, however, nearly all college instructors, from tenured professors to temporary lecturers, and many private school teachers as well, must suffer the indignity of periodic student evaluations. In some institutions, a few negative evaluations can lead to teachers being granted the opportunity to “explore other career options” or “spend more time with their families.” In nearly all cases, student evaluations are factored into tenure and promotion decisions.

Sounds fair, right?

One venerable scholar and economist tells us that when it comes

to student ratings, teachers' looks are actually more important than their instructional ability. Professor Daniel Hamermesh of the University of Texas, Austin, teamed with student Amy Parker to show college-student volunteers photos of ninety-four professors, then they asked them to rate their looks. When Hamermesh and Parker compared those ratings to average student evaluation scores for courses taught by these professors, they discovered that the professors rated most beautiful scored a point higher than those rated least beautiful. A point may not sound like a lot, but student evaluations rarely vary much.

The study by Hamermesh and Parker also disclosed that good looks generated more of a premium, and bad looks more of a penalty, for male instructors. Hamermesh and Parker's data show that the effect of beauty on teaching evaluations for men was three times as great as for women, and that minorities of both sexes earned lower evaluations than white males.⁴²

Sound trivial? Not if you're a professor who didn't get tenure because of low student evaluations. Or if anonymous students identify you by name and post criticism of your body shape, wardrobe choices, or complexion on one of several websites dedicated to rating professors, such as www.ratemyprofessors.com, www.professorperformance.com, and www.ratingsonline.com.

Nor is this a new phenomenon emerging because of the Internet. In 1973, an audience of professional educators attended a lecture by Myron Fox, PhD, an expert on the application of mathematics to human behavior. He delivered a lecture infused with boundless enthusiasm, double-talk, and contradictory assertions. Afterward the audience was asked to rate the lecture. "Dr. Fox" received very high ratings—and absolutely none of the audience recognized that it was a hoax, that he was not a pedagogue at all but merely a handsome actor with no academic credentials.⁴³

An isolated event? Not at all. Several subsequent studies confirmed that students tend to rate their teacher's performance more on the basis of superficialities like PA and clothing style than on the content of their lectures or their ability to communicate.⁴⁴

And now that we've completed our PA tour of the schoolhouse, it's time to go to work.

CHAPTER 5

The Job Is Looking Good



*PA's influence on careers and the
workplace dynamic*

So you're good-looking. Neonatal nurses nurtured you nonstop upon your arrival in this world. Your parents handed you everything a kid could want, and way more. Teachers from preschool and kindergarten all the way through college and grad school bent backward and forward to cut you every break possible. But now here you are, out of school and about to interview for your first job. So put all that stuff behind you and get real, young sir or miss, because this is the workplace. The gig. The grind. The rat race. Here in Nine-to-Five City, stockholders insist on profits and bosses expect you to work hard to inflate their bonuses. The bottom line *is* the bottom line.

Do you really think that anybody, from the executive suite to the factory floor, gives a flying flip about how beautiful you are?

Well, yes, they do.

And quite a bit.

The fact is, if you are competing for a position against candidates who seem to possess exactly the same qualifications, but *you*

Even though they *believe* that they are able to overlook an applicant's PA, many experienced managers will end up selecting an applicant with high PA whose job qualifications merely match those of a less attractive candidate.

are very attractive while the others are average or less in the PA department, scientific studies say that you will get the job and they will not. Always? Well, if you're bursting with PA but could use a manicure or even a minor makeover while the competition is well groomed but so-so looking, relax—you've still got the edge. Your good looks help most when you and your competitors are all otherwise run-of-the-mill candidates: If another applicant is exceptionally well qualified but you're not, you may get a follow-up interview but probably not the job.¹

The data and studies that form the scientific basis for this hire-the-handsome phenomenon have been available to personnel managers and corporate management for decades. Most human resource types are well aware that signing the guy with the toothpaste-ad smile or the gorgeous gal with the gams up to *here* isn't solid management practice. An experienced hiring hand will ignore good looks, right?

Not exactly. Yes, the science is readily available and many seasoned hiring executives have actually read it. And no, it doesn't seem to make much difference. Even though they *believe* that they are able to overlook an applicant's PA, and even as they sincerely insist that they ignore such superficialities when making hiring decisions, many experienced managers will end up selecting an applicant with high PA whose job qualifications merely match or parallel those of a less attractive candidate. That's because they think the person with high PA is actually *better* qualified or, if not, will nevertheless turn into a better employee.²

And short men, along with all PA-challenged women, no matter how qualified, start any job interview with strikes against them, even

when the hiring decision is made by a highly experienced manager or HR executive.³

In 2000, British economist Barry Harper examined voluminous data relating to over 11,000 people born in Britain in 1958 and concluded that both men and women “assessed as unattractive or short experience a significant earnings penalty. Tall men receive a pay premium while obese women experience a pay penalty.” Harper concluded that while there was evidence that short men and ugly women were on infrequent occasion less productive, “the bulk of the pay differential for appearance arises from employer discrimination.”⁴

Oh yes, that’s England! But here in the land of the free and the home of the brave? Would an American company really discriminate against a job applicant because he was short? Against a woman who was, shall we say, not so attractive?

Darn tootin’ they do, and a pair of Yank professors have the goods to prove it. Daniel M. Cable, a business professor at the University of North Carolina, Chapel-Hill, and Timothy A. Judge, professor of management at the University of Florida, studied data from 8,590 individuals in four different studies in both Great Britain and the United States.⁵ These studies followed thousands of participants from childhood to adulthood and examined many details of both their work and their personal lives.

Cable and Judge found no important difference between employees in the United Kingdom and the United States; in both countries their data document a clear linkage between physical height and career success. A person’s altitude, they learned, is a significant predictor of attitudes expressed toward them. Height flavors the way people dole out social esteem, invest in leadership, and rate performance, especially in men.

Judge and Cable also examined the relationship between individuals’ physical height and their incomes. Overall, their study was among the most comprehensive analyses of the relationship of height to workplace success ever conducted. Their results strongly suggest that tall individuals enjoy many advantages in critical aspects of their careers throughout their organizational lives. How much more? Every inch over average, which for an adult male American is

a smidgen over five feet nine inches, means an annual paycheck bonus of some \$789.

Even the professors who conducted the research find this information troubling. “With a few exceptions, such as professional basketball, no one could argue that height is an essential ability

“We’re talking about literally hundreds of thousands of dollars of earnings advantage that a tall person enjoys.”

required for job performance or a bona fide occupational qualification,” observed Judge. Yet, if you project the annual paycheck rewards of being tall over the course of a thirty-year career and compound it, “We’re talking about literally hundreds of thousands of dollars of earnings advantage that a tall person enjoys,” Judge concluded.

But how does that work? Why does height make a man more effective on the job? Cable and Judge found that greater height boosted supervisors’ subjective ratings of work performance, including their evaluations of job effectiveness, and that, like the expectation phenomenon discussed in Chapter 4, it also elevated such objective measures of performance as sales volume. The relationship between height and earnings was especially strong in sales and management but also found its way into such less social occupations as engineering, accounting, and computer programming.

Cable and Judge speculate that being tall may boost an individual’s self-confidence, improving their performance. Other people may also ascribe tall people higher status and afford them greater respect, lending them an edge in negotiating and sales situations. This commanding influence may be an evolutionary remnant from a time when our ancestors lived at the mercy of predators and physical size was an index of power and strength that man used when making “fight or flight” decisions. Primitive humans “ascribed leader-like qualities to tall people because they thought they would be better able to protect them,” opined Judge. “Evolutionary psychologists would argue that some of those old patterns still operate in our perceptions today.”

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Of all the large institutions found in modern societies, none is more of a meritocracy than the military. Since World War II, at least,

individual ability has been the most important determinant of personal advancement. While U.S. armed forces were segregated by race until the Korean War, military leaders have since learned that the talent for leading troops in combat bears no relationship to the color of one's skin or to the occupations or social status of one's forebears.

Yet even the military takes cognizance of each individual's PA. Officers and noncommissioned officers (NCOs) are subject to regular performance ratings, where among the qualities rated by superiors is "military appearance," a subset of PA.

In 1984, Professor Allan Mazur of Syracuse University led a team of social scientists that collected data from the U.S. Military Academy Class of 1950, a cohort that by then was approaching retirement from military service. Mazur and his colleagues found that "facial dominance" (i.e., a handsome, youthful look—another way to parse the PA phenomenon) was strongly related to promotions within the corps of cadets during the class's junior and senior years at West Point. Facial appearance, however, did not seem to have any bearing on predictions of rank attainment after graduation or during an individual's early or middle career path.⁶

What Mazur and his colleagues may have neglected to factor in, however, was the U.S. Army officer promotion system. Barring death or dishonor, military academy graduates who remained in uniform after completing their mandatory five-year service period could be expected to serve on active duty until mandatory retirement age, which increases with an individual's rank until reaching a maximum. In other words, after a certain birthday, it's up or out.

By virtue of having been commissioned on the same day, all members of a West Point class will get their first three or four promotions virtually in lockstep with other classmates. Thus, with few exceptions, every member of the Class of 1950 was promoted to first lieutenant, captain, major, and lieutenant colonel within a few months of each other.

Above the rank of lieutenant colonel, however, the army promotions pyramid narrows sharply. There are far fewer slots for one-star generals than for colonels, fewer still for two-star generals, and only a relative handful of three- and four-star positions. With

extremely rare exceptions, these final promotions occur about three or four years before the end of a career. They are usually based on the collective effects of many performance and fitness ratings, as well as personal observations by the army's most senior officers and America's top political figures, including the president.

In 1989, five years after the initial survey of the Class of 1950, Mazur and his colleagues sent out follow-up questionnaires. By then, the highest-ranking generals from the class had reached mandatory retirement age and left the service. To Mazur's surprise, facial dominance—measured from cadet portraits taken years earlier—was now revealed as a significant predictor of promotion to the top ranks of general officer. In other words, owning a face with the right kind of PA was a big advantage even in reaching the top of the military promotion pyramid.⁷

Not only is it more difficult for the short or unattractive to compete with taller or better-looking peers, but, according to yet another study, at the very least among lawyers, simply looking much different from your peers imposes a paycheck penalty.

Ishak Saporta, a professor at Israel's Tel Aviv University, teamed with Jennifer Halpern, an Ithaca, New York, researcher, to study relationships between height, weight, and PA of lawyers and their salaries. Their data suggest that even among those most acquainted with laws prohibiting employment discrimination, individuals who are thinner, heavier, or shorter than peers are penalized with lower salaries and less important jobs, leading to fewer promotion opportunities. They analyzed data from a 1984 national survey of nearly 3,000 American lawyers and found that men who were thin *or* overweight earned less than men of average build. This was not true for women attorneys; in their case, median starting salaries were nearly 10 percent lower than starting salaries for male attorneys.⁸ As University of Michigan graduate student Robert Quinn observed in his 1978 master's thesis, PA discrimination toward women lawyers is more subtle. Less attractive women attorneys, whether skinny or fat, are much less likely to get jobs that require face-to-face contact with the public—and these are usually the best-paying jobs in the legal profession.⁹

Those blessed with an attractive countenance gain many workplace advantages collectively referred to as “beauty bias.” There is, however, one glaring exception to beauty bias: Exceptionally beautiful women are often at a disadvantage when seeking a job in which appearance is deemed irrelevant, or a job strongly associated with masculine qualities like strength, endurance, and the ability to exercise good judgment under pressure.

A study carried out at Rice University found that while average-looking and attractive men were more often selected for such positions as driving a tow truck or operating a switchboard, beautiful women never won these kinds of jobs when the competition was female and less attractive. The study also found that when it comes to PA, bias is in the eye of the beholder. For example, while *male* employers are usually eager to hire a beautiful woman for a job where face-to-face contact with clients or customers is important, including such occupations as receptionists, dietitians, and public relations, *female* employers are far less willing to do so.¹⁰

The Rice University study also found that for jobs in which appearance isn’t considered important, employers of both genders usually opt for a less attractive woman over a more attractive one. One explanation may be that employers think female PA correlates with perceptions of femininity: When a highly attractive woman applies for a traditionally masculine job like truck driver or security guard, she is usually perceived as less capable of meeting the job’s requirement for “masculine” qualities. This perception that attractive women lack so-called masculine character traits also extends to supervisory and managerial positions: Attractive females who reach high-level management are more likely to have their success attributed to luck. If a woman is unattractive enough, however, her success in business is viewed as the result of ability.¹¹

Yet merely being good-looking is often not enough to get a qualified man or woman a job with frequent public contact. In the

Exceptionally beautiful women are often at a disadvantage when seeking a job strongly associated with masculine qualities like strength, endurance, and the ability to exercise good judgment under pressure.

twenty-first century, the successful job seeker must also appear youthful. As reported in *Chain Drug Review*, a trade journal, Combe Inc., manufacturer of Just For Men hair coloring, surveyed professional career advisers to determine what personal qualities employers most valued. That survey, “Strategies for Job Success,” disclosed that looks are important to workplace advancement: An employee’s youthful appearance affects salary and is closely tied to promotions. Almost two-thirds of those surveyed reported that male clients had lost job opportunities because they looked too old. More than three-fourths said that in the economic climate of the twenty-first century, looking younger gives men a distinct competitive advantage. And because job interviewers in many fields tend to be younger than the applicants they screen, they tend to pass over their elders and hire younger workers.¹²

This pattern also extends to *keeping* a job; survey respondents indicated that gray hair undermines job security—bad news for aging baby boomers now approaching the so-called “silver ceiling.”

And it’s not only American men who face premature retirement or unemployment as they age. In 2003, the management of Malaysian Airlines System (MAS) made public what had long been unpublicized company policy—namely, the company’s female flight attendants were forced to “retire” at age 40. (Male flight attendants, however, are allowed to stay on the job until age 55.) Dr. Mohammed Don Abdullah, general manager for the airlines, defended this policy by observing that “customers prefer to be served by young, demure, and pretty stewardesses.”

Shocked, a Kuala Lumpur newspaper columnist compared this policy to the treatment afforded ballerinas. “In a nutshell, the simple message from this prominent senior officer is: ‘Go home. You are old. You are no longer attractive. We do not need you anymore,’” wrote Vasanthi Ramachandran in the *New Straits Times*. When the MAS general manager was criticized for his stand, he replied that the airline needed “frontliners who are mentally and physically alert; young, pretty, and quick to respond to emergencies, as the safety of passengers is our priority.”¹³

In fact, the chief rivals to MAS for transpacific travel, including

Air India, Thai Airways International, Cathay Pacific, All Nippon Airways, and Lufthansa, all allow female flight attendants to stay on the job until age 60 or older. What the MAS official did not say, however, was that like most airlines in a highly competitive environment, its marketing strategy targets business travelers, who are overwhelmingly male. By employing younger and prettier flight attendants than rivals, MAS seeks a competitive edge. Putting aside Malaysian law, local customs, and political correctness, the airline knew that using attractive women to lure male frequent fliers was a winning strategy.

A parallel marketing strategy directed at women was employed by a giant international cosmetics manufacturer, according to a former midlevel manager. In a lawsuit against L'Oréal USA, Inc., Elysa Yanowitz asserts that she was forced out of her job as a regional sales manager after she refused her boss's order to fire a sales associate because she was "not good looking enough."¹⁴

In a similar vein, in 2004, hip and upscale clothing retailer Abercrombie & Fitch agreed to pay \$50 million to settle a lawsuit that accused the chain of promoting whites over minorities, relegating dark-skinned and less attractive employees to store areas where few customers were likely to see them. In addition, in its catalogs and elsewhere, it was accused of cultivating a company image of highly attractive white people. The settlement obliged Abercrombie & Fitch to pay \$40 million to black, Hispanic, and Asian employees and job applicants and \$10 million for attorneys' fees, and to monitor compliance of changes in its employment policies.¹⁵ The U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) estimated that some 10,000 Hispanic, Asian, and black people would share in the settlement of this lawsuit.

While the plaintiffs and the EEOC claimed victory, Abercrombie & Fitch spun the settlement another way, insisting that it had done nothing wrong. "We have, and always have had, no tolerance for discrimination," said CEO Mike Jeffries. "We decided to settle this suit because we felt that a long, drawn-out dispute would have been harmful to the company and distracting to management."

Former Abercrombie & Fitch managers Dan Moon and Andrea

Mandrick told *60 Minutes* reporter Morley Safer that they were hired for their good looks. They also revealed that corporate supervisors routinely had them reduce the working hours of less attractive salespeople. In their opinion, because the retailer's customer base was young, hip, well-educated white people, the discrimination they saw while working for the chain was more about "lookism" than it was about racism. They added that Abercrombie & Fitch was after a certain "look" in its sales force; the less someone had of this look, the less the salesperson worked. "I was sick of getting my schedule back every week with lines through names," says Mandrick. "I can't look the people that work for me . . . in the eye and . . . lie to them and say, 'Oh, we don't have hours,' when, really, it's because they weren't pretty enough."

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If you are happily among the good-looking and have a job, over the long haul—and most likely, over the short term, too—you will probably be paid more than average-looking counterparts and you will probably rise to a higher level in the organization than those with less PA. Studies show that physically attractive people tend to have better-paying jobs in higher-level positions than do their less attractive counterparts.

How much more? Evidence from studies conducted in the United States, Canada, and China in 1994 and 1999 suggests that highly attractive employees enjoy increased earnings of between 7.5 percent and 15 percent over their average-looking peers.¹⁶

Why will a bottom-line business shell out more moola to those oozing PA if how they *look* doesn't make any difference in how well

Does hiring good-looking people increase productivity or somehow help to bring in more bucks?

they do their job? Is it merely discrimination against the PA impaired, or does hiring good-looking people increase productivity or somehow help to bring in more bucks?

To find out, economists Gerard A. Pfann of Holland's University of the Maastricht; Jeff E. Biddle, Michigan State University; Daniel S.

Hamermesh, University of Texas, Austin; and Ciska M. Bosman of Nice, France, conducted a study focused on the looks of executives

in Holland's busy and highly competitive advertising industry.¹⁷ Pfann and his colleagues collected data from hundreds of Dutch advertising firms to analyze the effect of employees' attractiveness, or beauty, on their firms' performance.

They began by assuming that all else being equal, in an industry where employees frequently interact with clients, firms with more attractive workers will face less customer discrimination and thus gain a competitive advantage. But to make a difference on the bottom line of a balance sheet, the beauty of employees must have some measurable positive effect, both on the agency's production of revenue and on its profits after expenses. So, if an agency with beautiful workers pays them *more* than not-so-beautiful workers of equal ability, the company must somehow bring in not merely enough extra income to offset the expense of higher salaries and fringe benefits, but still more income to cover the expense of finding and hiring good-looking people and keeping other, less physically attractive workers motivated—and even more income to increase profit.

The income generated by employee labor is known as “quasi-rents,” and according to economic theory, if quasi-rents increase with employee ability, profits may be increased by employing more able or productive workers.

In advertising firms, good working relationships among co-workers and with clients create a type of “human capital,” and good ways to create these relationships lower the cost of acquiring this capital. So, more beautiful managers may find it easier to develop relationships with other employees and clients, generating higher earnings for themselves and higher quasi-rents for their company. All else being equal, firms with more beauty capital will produce more and obtain higher revenues. This was the theory that the data would either prove or debunk.

To begin their study, Pfann and his colleagues collected photos of the top management of 289 Dutch ad agencies, and then billing and earnings data from those agencies over a twelve-year span starting in 1984. Collectively, the agencies' sales volume represented about 70 percent of all ad industry revenue in the Netherlands—a very sizable sample.

Executive beauty was assessed using 1,282 black-and-white

photos—head-and-shoulders shots from industry yearbooks—an average of 2.71 pictures per firm. These photos were rated independently by a panel of two men and one woman aged 40 or older, and by a second panel of two men and one woman aged 39 or younger. (The makeup of these panels reflected the age-sex distribution of the ad agencies' clientele.) The people in the photos were rated on a five-point scale, where 5 was "strikingly handsome or beautiful" and 1 was "homely."

The panel rated the average ad-agency manager at 2.80, or just below average in PA. And, as expected, executive beauty had a positive effect on revenue. After taking into account such factors as the size and location of the agency and its experience in the industry, whether small or large, all but a few agencies with better-looking executives reported significantly higher revenue.

But hold on! Does beauty really bring success? What if it's the other way around—success attracts beauty? What if better-looking executives are attracted to join successful agencies *because* these firms bring in more revenue? By tracking employment records, Pfann and his colleagues found no evidence to support this notion: Previously successful firms did *not* attract better-looking executives.

In fact, the Dutch study showed that beauty is highly productive. Among all firms sampled, those with better-looking executives brought in an average of 120,000 guilders more per year in billing revenue. And aside from a handful of tiny agencies operating in Holland's most competitive business region, known as the Randstad, firms boasting better-looking management averaged an extra 188,000 guilders per year in revenue. (The study identified several very small firms, all operating in Holland's most competitive advertising environment, that lacked the financial resources or management ability to capitalize on having a few executives with higher-than-average PA.)

And how much better looking were the men and women who run top-earning firms than those of the average Dutch agency manager? Pfann and friends calculated that the most successful firms employed managers whose beauty was greater than that of ninety out of every hundred Dutch ad executives.

And now to the bottom line. What was the return on this investment of beauty capital? By massaging their Dutch data and estimating individual executive salaries based on industry data, Pfann calculated that good-looking execs created significantly more income from quasi-rents than they cost their companies in higher wages. Even though their own salaries substantially exceeded industry averages, their agencies earned even more. “Beauty capital yields returns to both workers and firms,” concluded Pfann and his colleagues.

Pfann calculated that good-looking execs created significantly more income than they cost their companies in higher wages.

More attractive employees also bring another asset to their employers: According to a 1999 study by Sara J. Solnick of the University of Miami and Maurice E. Schweitzer of the University of Pennsylvania’s Wharton School, those blessed with PA tend to have an advantage in bargaining situations.

For many goods and services, the market price is influenced by both market forces and negotiations. In other words, some people or companies will pay more or receive less for the same items or tasks. For example, two executives being considered for similar jobs may get different salary offers but will be expected to perform the same work. The difference lies in the negotiating skills of both the executives and those offering them the job. Similarly, a company purchasing agent may get a manufacturer of, say, spark plugs to throw in a few extra for every hundred the company purchases.

Because many dimensions of business hinge on bargaining, good-looking negotiators may bring their organizations more for less business, which is one way of defining increased productivity. In an effort to see if the bargaining process was influenced by PA or by gender, Sara Solnick and Maurice Schweitzer conducted an “ultimatum game” experiment.¹⁸

They set up a stylized bargaining situation often used to examine a broad range of behaviors. Stripped to essentials, one player, “the Proposer,” suggests a certain split of a monetary sum to the second player, “the Responder,” who either accepts or rejects the split. If the proposal is accepted, the money is divided accordingly.

If rejected, neither player receives anything. Thus, for example, a Proposer may suggest a 60–40 split of \$100 (the game only works if there is actual money involved) and the Responder either takes the \$40 or turns down the offer and receives nothing.¹⁹

In theory, Proposers offer the smallest amount of money possible and Responders accept it because something is better than nothing. In practice, however, this is rarely the case. Typically, a Proposer offers about half of the available money—but about 10 percent of such offers are rejected. When a Proposer offers 20 percent of the total pie, responders reject it about half the time.²⁰

Solnick and Schweitzer’s ultimatum game experiment involved men and women selected as attractive or unattractive. In the first stage of the experiment, seventy subjects made ultimatum decisions and were photographed. Afterward, a panel of twenty judges rated the photographs for PA.

The most and least attractive men and women were then selected and randomly ordered into photo books. In the third stage, 108 subjects looked at these photos and made ultimatum game decisions that were resolved by pairing their decisions with those of the photographed subjects.

The study revealed *no significant difference* in decisions made by either the most attractive or least attractive players. In other words, PA had no influence on their judgments. On the other hand, the researchers found very significant differences in the way other players treated both groups. Men and physically attractive women were offered more, while less was demanded from unattractive women and men. The message to business is clear: Don’t send an unattractive woman to negotiate on behalf of the firm because probably she will not drive as hard a bargain as a more attractive woman or almost any man.

Sexist? Undoubtedly. And yet that is what science says would provide the most profitable outcome.

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While PA in business can spell “personal asset” to those who have it, those high in PA must also shoulder the burden of their

bosses' higher expectations or jealousy—and when the boss is frustrated or disappointed, they pay a higher penalty for personal indiscretions than their more ordinary-looking colleagues.

This was the conclusion of a 2002 study by a psychology professor and a pair of undergraduate students at North Central College, in the Chicago suburb of Naperville. They assembled a group of ninety-eight students, including thirty-six MBA candidates, and asked them to act as “managers” in evaluating the actions of “employees” who violated a company policy against using company computers to access the Internet to shop.

Based on the data, Professor Karl Kelley and students Lori Nita and Brittain Bandura were able to observe how a manager's decision to punish an employee policy violator was affected by the employee's gender and PA. Their data revealed that attractive females were punished most harshly and attractive males suffered the least severe consequences. When it came to employees with low PA, however, the violator's gender made no difference.²¹

What's going on here? Why would managers come down harder on an attractive woman than an ordinary-looking one who had committed the same offense? Probably because business has a sort of love-hate relationship with beauty. Driven by ideals of fairness, or maybe envy, ill will can smolder against coworkers thought to have attained employment unjustly. Better-looking females are known particularly to be the target of such speculations. Managers are not insensitive to these dynamics and, to avoid accusations about preferential treatment, they can feel compelled to mete out stronger disciplinary action when a presumably preferred employee violates company rules. Their doing so is backhanded recognition that their PA opens many doors that remain closed to more average-looking people. Some managers therefore tend to hold their better-looking employees, whom they suspect have always gotten the breaks, more accountable for behaviors that have negative effects on the organization.²²

When the North Central College researchers conducted a second study that asked a similar group of student participants to decide another employee disciplinary matter, the results were less conclusive. For this study, each participant was provided a section

from an employee handbook outlining company policies on vacation, sick leave, and absences. An incident report described the employee's violation of company policy on missing work by repeatedly calling in sick when the individual was not in fact ill; instead, the employee used the time to moonlight for another employer or to address a relationship problem. They also got the employee's personnel file.

All information presented to the participants was identical except for the personnel file, which presented employees as male or female and sometimes included the employee's photo. In some cases, the photograph was manipulated to make its subject appear either very attractive or unattractive.

Students acting as "manager-evaluators" were unanimous in their agreement that the company policy was fair and that what the employee did was a clear violation of the policy. Participants differed, however, in their perceptions of the seriousness of a specific incident, demonstrating not uncommon sentiment against people presumed to benefit unjustly from good fortune, especially if they exploit it. Attractive males were judged more harshly than all others for the bogus sick call incidents, possibly due to a presumption about an unfair advantage in the workplace because of their appearance and sex. These judgments were consistent relative to attractive females as well as less attractive males and females, whether moonlighting or relationship problems motivated the sick calls.²³

To whom much is given, much is expected. Benefits that come with PA carry higher standards and harsher consequences for violating or not meeting these standards. This might be an example of

To whom much is given, much is expected. Benefits that come with PA carry higher standards and harsher consequences for violating or not meeting these standards.

"expectancy-violation theory,"²⁴ which posits that while stereotypes often affect people's expectations of others, no two social judgments are ever exactly alike.

Another study, conducted by Comila Shahani-Denning, a Hofstra University professor, and doctoral student Dawn Plumitallo, confirmed this bias against attractiveness in a performance appraisal situation. They gave bank supervisors a memo describing a problem

with a male or female employee who was portrayed as attractive, unattractive, or average. The memo asked the manager to assist in disciplining this employee. They found that supervisors were more likely to perceive an attractive employee as failing because of a lack of effort, whereas *unattractive* employees who fail were perceived as victims of bad luck—events or circumstances beyond their control.²⁵

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So you're good-looking, and just as your exceptional looks have opened many doors for you, you get this job—even though you were no better prepared for it than other candidates. If you keep your new job, you can expect a bigger salary and faster promotions than the average worker here. If you hope one day to rise to the top of your new company, you've got a good shot—but if you screw up, you can also expect to be treated more harshly than your fellow employees.

And as you get older, you will have to work harder and harder to hang on to your looks. So good luck. And what's this? You've been summoned for jury duty! Well, let's see how far physical attractiveness gets you in a court of law.

CHAPTER 6

Rendering Judgment: How Looks Affect Courtroom Results



*How PA testifies in courtrooms, jury boxes, and
judges' chambers*

“May it please the court, I enter into evidence that my client is a tall, handsome, healthy specimen, as virile a defendant as has ever graced this chamber. Could such a man actually do the terrible things of which he is accused? Plainly, he could not! Furthermore, I pray the court take judicial notice of my own physiognomy, which includes a broad chest and lean waist set off by a head of thick, lustrous hair, pearl-white teeth, unblemished skin devoid of scars or moles, twinkling eyes, and a duo of disarming dimples. Obviously, you must and will believe everything that I say!

“I therefore have no doubt that the court will find that the crime of which my client is accused, though indeed a very serious offense,

could not possibly have been committed by such a splendid-looking fellow as he. I now move that the court dismiss all charges, so that my client may at once regain his liberty and return to the pursuit of happiness to which he is so obviously entitled.”

Okay, okay. Let’s get real. Would any lawyer really come into court with such a ludicrous defense, claiming that his client is so gorgeous that he could not possibly be the archfiend described in sworn testimony by a phalanx of credible witnesses? Or that because the attorney himself is a hunk, the judge and jury ought to reject the testimony of a team of forensic experts, ignore a truckload of physical evidence—and accept whatever the defendant’s lawyer tells them instead?

You bet. Happens most every day.

Of course, few attorneys are so foolish as to couch their argument quite so baldly—they can’t actually say such things aloud, much less for the record in a court of law. But that doesn’t stop smart lawyers from using their own PA, that of witnesses, and especially their clients’ own good looks to influence jury verdicts and judicial rulings. And it’s been going on for a very long time.

Consider, for example, the 1929 trial of theater mogul Alexander Pantages, accused of raping seventeen-year-old Eunice Pringle. She appeared in court with her long dark hair in a pigtail fastened with a simple bow and wearing a dark blue, ankle-length dress with Dutch collar and cuffs, long gloves, flat shoes, and black stockings—as demure an adolescent as ever took the witness stand.

Pantages denied that any rape had occurred, denied that one was even attempted, swore that no such idea had even entered his head. Miss Pringle had made an appointment to audition her dance act, he said, then came to his downtown Los Angeles office. After chatting for a few minutes, she suddenly jumped up and without warning tore her clothing, jerked his shirt out of his pants, then ran into Spring Street screaming that she had been raped.

Pringle told another story. Pantages had shown no interest in

Would any lawyer really come into court claiming that his client is so gorgeous that he could not possibly be the archfiend described in sworn testimony by a phalanx of credible witnesses?

her act and had instead pawed her, and when she resisted he apparently became infused with animal lust. With almost superhuman strength, he overpowered her, forced her onto his carpeted floor, pried her legs apart, and had his way with her.

There were no other witnesses.

The case came down to “he said, she said.” The jury seemed fascinated with the contrast between the charming, shy, sweet young girl and the wrinkled, scrawny, sixty-something Pantages and his stiff, Old-World manners.

Hoping to show the jury what kind of person Pringle really was, the attorneys for Pantages petitioned the judge to order her to appear for cross-examination dressed exactly as she had been on the day of the alleged rape. When Pringle returned to court the school-girl was gone. In her place was a sexy young thing in an adult hairstyle, full makeup, and a clinging, low-cut dress that accentuated every lush curve—an irresistible, full-bodied young woman with the face of an angel.

This was the worst thing that could have happened for Pantages. Now anyone could see how a man with his faded looks and old-fashioned clothing—a man with little sex appeal and few prospects—could have lusted after a sexy morsel like Pringle and lost control of his sexual urges.

The aging showman was convicted and sent to prison.

Two years later, however, on appeal, he won a new trial. New evidence was introduced that thoroughly discredited Pringle’s testimony: By her sworn account, Pantages would have required not only superhuman strength but also four arms. New evidence suggested that Pringle had been bribed to bring rape charges against Pantages, paid by her forty-something lover, a mysterious Russian in the employ of an East Coast bootlegger, businessman, and banker named Joseph P. Kennedy. Yes, that Kennedy—the father of the future president of the United States. He coveted Pantages’s chain of sixty theaters and wanted to buy them at fire-sale price to turn his start-up film studio into a rival to more established studios and himself into a player.

The second jury deliberated briefly; Pantages left court a free man.¹

But how could such a thing happen? How could an innocent businessman with a sterling reputation be convicted of rape solely on the accusation of a single witness? Simply put, because the alleged victim was young and beautiful, and the alleged rapist exactly her opposite. Guided by a skilled prosecutor, jurors allowed intellect and reason to bow before emotion and instinct.

But it's hard to blame them: Science and society have struggled for centuries to find connections between human appearance and behavior, especially antisocial behavior.

In the sixteenth century, J. Baptiste della Porte (1535–1615) invented the pseudoscience of *physiognomy*, which claimed that judgments about people's character could be made from the appearance of their faces. After studying the cadavers of convicts executed for various crimes, he announced that people with small ears, bushy eyebrows, small noses, and large lips were the most likely to commit criminal acts. Two centuries later, physiognomist Johan Kaspar Lavater (1741–1801) made a connection between “shifty-eyed” people with weak chins and arrogant noses and criminal behavior.

Today, no serious sociologist or criminologist gives the slightest credence to such theories. Yet, until about 1950, respected academics known as “criminal anthropologists” preached that studying the human physique, or body constitution, would eventually show which people were born with genetically determined criminal tendencies, and that the expression of these “bad” genes could be ascertained by expert observation of an individual's facial features and body characteristics.²

Such pseudoscience probably rests on superstition, often intertwined with religious teachings, that links evil with ugliness. In antiquity, many people believed that those who consorted with or were possessed by demons, and often their descendants, were afflicted with repulsive appearances—God's way of warning others and of punishing sin. Evil creatures are variously described as the Old Testament's “fallen angels” or the New Testament's “malignant spirits.” Many even have names and are associated with such

Science and society have struggled for centuries to find connections between human appearance and behavior, especially antisocial behavior.

temptations as lust, mischief, or crime. For example, the demon Asmodeus could take either male or female form; it filled people with insatiable desires for sex, leading them to adultery, buggery, even child molestation. Beelzebub, lord of flies, was believed to inspire murder and cannibalism—anything to do with dead bodies. Nor were demons limited to Judeo-Christian theology. The Hindi vampire demon Rakshasas, for example, is associated with murder lust and was believed capable, for evil purposes, of reanimating dead bodies.³

Even today—in an era of near-instantaneous worldwide communications, where billions of pages of Internet information are available to anyone with a home computer, and in a time when robotic explorers beam back close-up images of Saturn’s moons and the dry seabeds of Mars—millions of Americans say they believe the Bible, demons included, is the literal Word of God. Not many years ago a substantial fraction of America—not all residing in rural areas or small towns—believed that when children were born with cerebral palsy, a brain disorder mostly afflicting motor skills, it was because of the sin of a parent or grandparent—bad blood, as it was called.⁴

Still, it’s been a while since “experts” opined that when it comes to guilt or innocence, one’s face equates to one’s destiny. Surely, civilization and the application of courtroom justice have come a very long way, haven’t they? Then what could cause a modern juror, sworn to uphold the law and to determine the facts of a case, to be swayed by the perception of a witness’s physical attractiveness?

To help answer this question, in 1988 Bruce Darby and Devon Jeffers of Ohio’s Denison University created a mock jury to investigate the interaction and effect(s) of hypothetical defendants’ PA on jurors. They recruited seventy-eight college students to serve as mock jurors and for openers asked them to rate their own PA.

Then photos of “defendants” were shown, “charges” were read, and “evidence” introduced. The jury was asked to evaluate, in turn, three categories of defendant—attractive, moderately attractive, or unattractive—and to decide not only the individual’s guilt or innocence but also, after rendering a guilty verdict, whether the

individual was truly responsible for the lawless act. Finally, jurors were asked to rate each defendant's trustworthiness, happiness, honesty, intelligence, and likability, and to recommend punishment for those "convicted."⁵

It should come as no surprise to anyone who has read the first five chapters of this book that attractive jurors were more likely to convict than to acquit an unattractive defendant. And that all jurors in the Darby and Jeffers experiment, regardless of their own personal PA, recommended the least severe punishment for the most attractive defendants. (Less attractive jurors, however, did not seem to factor a defendant's PA into decisions to convict or acquit.) Jurors with high personal PA rendered the harshest verdicts on the least attractive defendants, while jurors lacking in PA were toughest on average-looking defendants. So a smart attorney well versed in the art of criminal defense and representing a good-looking client facing a mountain of incriminating evidence will try to get the best-looking people he can find to put in the jury box. If the accused is PA-challenged, however, that same attorney will try to disqualify good-looking veniremen (i.e., prospective jurors) and seat only the least attractive. And when the client is, like most, only an average-looking person, a smart attorney will try to seat as many average-looking folks as possible.

Sounds pretty simple, no?

Not quite.

Actually, because of the possibility that studying an actual jury trial could affect its outcome, most studies on juror bias have been theoretical, which is to say, they don't involve actual defendants who are in jeopardy of losing life, liberty, or lucre. So any conclusions drawn from them must be tempered by that vital fact.

An important exception is the mammoth study conducted in Chicago in the early 1960s by Harry Kalven, Jr. and Hans Zeisel. They surveyed 225 actual juries and discovered that defendant characteristics, including PA, clearly influenced real-life jury verdicts.

Kalven and Zeisel also employed a questionnaire analysis to determine how judges, if asked to review evidence and determine guilt or innocence without the services of a jury, would have decided a

case that had previously been tried before a jury. Their study encompassed nearly 4,000 trials and showed that judges agreed with jury verdicts only 78 percent of the time.

The study also showed that when judge and jury failed to agree, juries were more lenient in 19 percent of the cases while judges showed more leniency in only 3 percent.⁶

Why were juries more lenient than judges? According to this study, sentiment, no less than the need to be certain beyond reasonable doubt, influenced juries far more than it did judges. Juries were more inclined to go easy when a defendant showed genuine regret, had recently experienced life difficulties, or looked physically attractive. Juries also tended to go easier on defendants with a high-status occupation, particularly physicians and members of the clergy; with personal demographics revealing elderly age and widow marital status; or when a likely guilty accomplice escaped penalty through plea bargaining and testifying against the defendant.

Not only are good-looking defendants less likely to be convicted, but when they are, they are likely to suffer less severe punishment than an unattractive person convicted of the same offense.

More recent research confirms and amplifies these findings as they bear on a defendant's looks: Not only are good-looking defendants less likely to be convicted, but when they are, they are likely to suffer less severe punishment than an unattractive person convicted of the same offense.

If justice were PA blind, a person's looks should make no difference to the judge who decides how much bail to assess a defendant awaiting trial in return for liberty. But is this true? To learn if that were so, a pair of British researchers collected data on bail sums assessed defendants in a variety of misdemeanor cases. Then police officers, none of whom were involved with the particular case in question, were asked to rate the attractiveness of the actual defendant in each case.

The data showed that, alas, not even judges are immune to the PA spell. On the average, most judges set bail for attractive defendants significantly lower than for those less attractive.

The same study also examined fines levied by judges against people convicted of misdemeanors. Again, the better-looking

defendant usually got off with a smaller fine than did an unattractive offender convicted of the same offense. While this suggests that the legal system operates with a bias for attractive people and against ugly ones, this particular study also demonstrated a much weaker correlation between a defendant's looks and a judge's punishment in *felony* cases.⁷

When it comes to sentencing, most judges are empowered with wide latitude of discretion. Even where there are minimum-sentence laws, a jurist can order a convict imprisoned under very severe conditions, sent to a country club-type minimum security facility, or freed on probation. Often jurists can elect to substitute psychiatric treatment for prison. But when do a defendant's looks provide a reason to hand down less onerous types of sentences?

To answer this question, researchers Stuart McKelvie and James Coley of Bishop's University in Quebec, Canada, recruited 384 undergraduate students for mock juries. For each case, mock jurors were presented with a dozen experimental conditions, including a description of the defendant's crime and a picture of the defendant's face. Then they were asked to make sentencing recommendations. Although the severity of punishment meted out was greater for a murder than for a robbery, it did not differ significantly no matter how attractive—or not—the defendant appeared. A less attractive robber, however, was more likely to get a recommendation for psychiatric care than was a more attractive miscreant. In this study, jurors equated ugliness with bad behavior as it applies to mental illness—but not when it comes to criminal acts.⁸

But a defendant's PA, as well as the appearance of a witness against that defendant, can also warp a jury's perception of guilt. Professor Karl L. Wuensch of the Department of Psychology at East Carolina University in Greenville, North Carolina, and his colleague, Charles H. Moore, set out to see how this theory might work. They enlisted more than 300 student volunteers as mock jurors in a supposed lawsuit in which a man accused his female boss of sexual harassment.

Using several sets of mock juries, Wuensch and Moore manipulated the physical attractiveness of both accused and accuser. Jurors were asked to decide if the female defendant was guilty and then

to rate their own “certainty of belief” in the defendant’s guilt or innocence.

As it happened, jurors were more convinced of a woman’s guilt if the man who brought the charges was attractive than if he was not. It was, in other words, easier for a juror to believe that a woman might cross the line of propriety if the object of her desire was a hunk than if he was ordinary looking.

Female jurors also treated the issue of an *accusing man’s* PA as significant only when the woman defendant was *unattractive*. When a pretty woman was accused of sexual harassment, her accuser’s looks seemed to make little difference to women on the mock jury.

With male jurors, however, the accuser’s attractiveness significantly affected perception of guilt when the defendant was attractive. When accused and accuser significantly *differed* in their degree of attractiveness, women jurors were somewhat more likely than male jurors to conclude that sexual harassment had indeed taken place.⁹

Beyond sexual harassment lies rape, and in many rape cases that go before a jury, verdicts often hang on which party has more credibility, the alleged victim or the alleged rapist. In an attempt to discern whether the PA of these parties affects jurors, in 2001 researchers at Britain’s University of Portsmouth set up a two-part study.¹⁰ Alder Vrij and Hannah Firmin first asked volunteers to take a self-exam called Burt’s Rape Myth Acceptance Scale (RMA), which correlates an individual’s attitudes toward rape by measuring how accepting he or she is of common—but false or erroneous—myths about forcible sexual congress.

Test subjects were then invited to share their perception of a hypothetical rape case. Although every subject heard the same scenario, descriptions concerning attractiveness varied for the alleging victim and alleged offender. Vrij and Firmin sought to determine whether this appearance feature of supposed rape victims and offenders influences their credibility and, if so, whether the effect differs according to a jury member’s stance toward legends about rape incidents.

Test results were mixed. Nevertheless, Vrij and Firmin concluded that sufficient PA bias existed that anyone being considered

for a jury in a rape trial, or for employment as a police officer, should be required to take the RMA exam.

They might also have concluded that judges who hear rape cases would serve their communities better if they, too, were conversant with Burt's RMA. That's because other studies of both simulated and actual trials indicate that a handsome rapist is more likely to get off with a shorter sentence than an ugly rapist who committed a similar crime. That is to say, judges frequently give more lenient sentences to attractive people convicted of rape.¹¹

Moreover, any defendant accused of raping an *unattractive* victim is less likely to be found guilty than one accused of raping an attractive victim.¹²

Jurors also like defendants and attorneys who smile on appropriate occasions more than those who don't.¹³

Not everyone can look like a movie star, of course. But most jury consultants—usually a psychologist who helps attorneys select jurors—agree that even a good suit or a new tie can help make jurors see a defendant as a more attractive person. In fact, a 1968 study of inmates whose appearance was improved by cosmetic surgery before their release found that this group of multiple offenders was less likely to return to jail than those who did not get such surgery. They were even less likely to return than inmates who received rehabilitation services. A decade later, a follow-up study of former inmates found that while the surgery did not affect the chances of someone committing another crime, it lowered the probability that the offender would be returned to prison for that crime.¹⁴

In summary, unless your attractiveness was obviously helpful to you in committing a crime (something I'll talk about later in this chapter), you are less likely to be convicted and less likely to see the inside of a jail if you are perceived as attractive—even if that requires you to wear dentures, tint your hair, climb into elevator shoes, or wear a Wonderbra. Or, if you have the time and money, get a new nose and do something about those bags under your eyes.¹⁵

Any defendant accused of raping an *unattractive* victim is less likely to be found guilty than one accused of raping an attractive victim.

Physical attractiveness also has an effect on the outcome of civil trials. The PA of witnesses, attorneys, and litigants influences jurors and judges in these proceedings in much the same way as in criminal proceedings.

Nowhere is this more evident than in how juries treat the testimony of expert witnesses. Samuel Gross, a University of Michigan law professor, has written about the paradox of expert testimony. He noted that “we call expert witnesses to testify about matters that are beyond the ordinary understanding of lay people (that is both the major practical justification and a formal legal requirement for expert testimony), and then we ask lay judges and jurors to judge their testimony”¹⁶

Expert witnesses are expected to instruct the jury in such complex and often arcane matters as economic modeling, business practices in foreign countries, medical procedures, animal anatomy, physics, chemistry, and a host of other technical or scientific disciplines. In high-stakes civil cases, expert witnesses frequently are called to testify by both plaintiff and defendant, usually offering subtly different but sometimes diametrically opposite conclusions.

Which expert does a juror believe?

Often, it’s the one who looks and sounds the most believable. Or it is the expert who is the most likable or the most attractive. Judges, who usually have both legal training and years of experience in courtrooms, are often able to set aside the influences of PA when evaluating an expert witness’s testimony. However, jurors as a group are less able to separate their *feelings* about a witness from what that person has told them. This is also true about the way jurors perceive lawyers who introduce evidence, elicit testimony, or cross-examine a witness. Whether male or female, jurors will find the more attractive attorney more likable and therefore more believable and worthy of trust.¹⁷

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While statutes prohibiting discrimination in such areas as housing, schooling, and employment on the basis of race, ethnicity or religion, gender, or age have been on the books for decades, only a few

U.S. jurisdictions have legislation specifically addressing appearance-based discrimination.¹⁸ One of them is the District of Columbia, where the statute prohibiting employment discrimination includes “personal appearance” as a protected category.

The DC statute defines “personal appearance” as “the outward appearance of any person, irrespective of sex, with regard to bodily condition or characteristics, manner or style of dress, and manner or style of personal grooming, including, but not limited to, hairstyle and beards.”

A Santa Cruz, California, ordinance prohibits discrimination based on, among other things, “physical characteristics,” defined as “a bodily condition or characteristic of any person which is from birth, accident, or disease, or from any natural physical development, or any event outside the control of that person, including individual physical mannerisms.” But while Michigan, for example, prohibits discrimination based on height or weight, it provides no coverage for other aspects of physical appearance.

If “lookism” is still legal in most of the United States, in the English-speaking nations of the former British Commonwealth, where British common law remains the basis for civil codes, physical attractiveness is addressed in unusual ways. In Australia, until November 2002, a woman suing for damages arising from the wrongful death of her husband by another was required to undergo a humiliating hearing where a judge, after considering her age, “warmth of personality,” and physical attractiveness, would determine how “marriageable” she was and therefore by how much her damages should be reduced! Australian courts, however, have presumed that few men are financially dependent on their wives, and on the few occasions that such dependency has been demonstrated in spousal wrongful death cases, judges have never required a widower to undergo a similar evaluation of his marriage prospects.¹⁹

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There is, of course, no truly objective measure of individual PA as it relates to its influence on a jury’s determination of guilt or innocence or the harshness or forbearance of sentencing.

Only a few U.S. jurisdictions have legislation specifically addressing appearance-based discrimination.

If “finders of facts”—judges or a jury impaneled to decide the fate of defendants—tend to discover more mercy in their hearts for those who look more rather than less like they do, will they not also note, for example, such an obvious component of physical attractiveness as skin pigmentation, no less than the size and shape of facial features? In other words, if a defendant of one race comes before a jury of another race, do jurors allow their PA biases to distort justice?

One classic study of this phenomenon, by David A. Abwender and Kenyatta Hough, involved 207 participants chosen from twenty-five regional postbaccalaureate achievement programs at universities across the United States. They were high-achieving college graduates who were first-generation Americans from low-income, ethnic minority groups. Participants had been previously selected for special academic training to better prepare them for completing doctoral programs; they were therefore presumably brighter and possessed more mature judgment than an average American. Because few prospective test subjects were of Asian or Native American ancestry, researchers limited their test group to those describing themselves as African American, Hispanic, or white. The group ranged in age from nineteen to fifty-one years; the mean age was twenty-four.

While several previous studies indicated that PA was a significant factor in jury decisions, no previous study had explored negligent homicide, an unintentional crime associated with poor or lapsed judgment and lacking any implication that a defendant had exploited PA for personal gain. Abwender and Hough sought to learn if a defendant’s higher PA would lead a mock juror to expect them to display better judgment. If so, they theorized, then male jurors should be harsher with an attractive woman accused of a crime of negligence, such as vehicular homicide. Because previous studies suggest that women care less about a female defendant’s PA, researchers theorized that the expectation of better judgment should be weaker for a female juror.

They also sought to confirm a second hypothesis: that African American jurors would show greater leniency toward an African American defendant than white jurors would, while white jurors

would treat African Americans more harshly than members of their own race.

The researchers asked study subjects to read an account of a vehicular homicide that described the facts and circumstances of a killing in an identical manner, except for three particulars: the defendant's PA, which varied between highly attractive and unattractive; the defendant's gender; and the defendant's race, which was variously stated as African American or white. Participants were then asked to rate the defendant's guilt and to recommend a prison sentence.

Contrary to the researchers' expectations and some previous studies, when the crime was negligent homicide, women treated an unattractive female defendant more harshly than an attractive female defendant. In other words, even if women jurors expect a little better judgment from a prettier woman, they still give her a break when it comes to sentencing. Men, on the other hand, were more inclined to give an *un*attractive woman that break, but neither rewarded nor penalized a woman for her good looks. In summary, when an attractive woman screws up big-time, her PA never hurts but could help if there are enough women on the jury.

As for issues of race, Abwender and Hough found that African American participants showed greater leniency when the defendant was described as African American. Hispanic participants, however, dealt more severely with African Americans than with those described as white. White participants, against researchers' expectations, displayed no measurable race-based bias.²⁰

The study subjects for this experiment, however, were chosen from an atypical pool. While all were minorities, including those who identified themselves as whites, as potential jurors they were also, like Yogi Bear, "smarter than the average bear." Young college graduates who had been accepted into doctoral programs, individually and collectively they did not much resemble America's pool of potential jurors.

America carries the stain of centuries of racial bias. It was shocking, but hardly surprising, when novelist Harper Lee made this point in her 1960 Pulitzer Prize-winning novel, *To Kill a Mockingbird*: "In our courts, when it's a white man's word against a black

man, the white man always wins. They're ugly, but those are the facts of life. . . . The one place a man ought to get a square deal is in the courtroom, be he any color of the rainbow, but people have a way of carrying their resentments right into a jury box."

Forty years later, two University of Michigan scholars set out to learn if the racial biases so blatant and acceptable in 1960 were still operating. On the basis of previously published research reports, Samuel R. Sommers and Phoebe C. Ellsworth hypothesized that during the intervening decades, race relations and related matters had been so widely publicized that in any trial where race was an issue, most white jurors would bend over backward to avoid even the appearance of bigotry.²¹

From previous research suggesting that the character and complexity of race relations in America had changed, they concluded that the elimination of race-based laws and increased economic and social opportunities for minorities, especially blacks, had made racial relations far more nuanced than before the Civil Rights struggle of the 1960s. What they didn't know, and so sought to learn, was if white jurors might be biased against black defendants when the case to be decided had no obvious racial dimension.

Sommers and Ellsworth sent a white male research assistant to the waiting area of an international airport, where he handed out questionnaires to 196 U.S.-born white travelers who ranged in age from eighteen to eighty-three. Their median age was forty-three, and 55 percent were male. Because each traveler had to show a driver's license to pass through airport security, and because in that state driver's license holders are called for jury duty, it was assumed that all test subjects would be eligible for jury duty.

These test subjects were asked to read a brief trial summary and then encouraged to place themselves in the role of juror while answering a questionnaire about legal issues required to resolve a trial.

The trial summary included two paragraphs summarizing the prosecutor's case, two paragraphs summarizing the defense case, and a set of judicial instructions that laid out the legal criteria for conviction. The narrative described a mythical locker-room altercation between two high school basketball players. The prosecution

alleged that one player intentionally assaulted the other. The defense maintained that the contact that had caused injury was unintentional: When a third player intervened, the defendant claimed that he panicked, tried to leave the area, and in the process *accidentally* struck the victim.

In the “race salient” version of the trial summary, a witness testified that the defendant was one of only two players of his race (either white or black) on the team and had previously been subjected to unfair criticism and racial slurs. In another version of events, a witness testified that the defendant had only one friend on the team and had previously been the object of obscene remarks and unfair criticism; but there is no mention of race.

Mock jurors received different versions of the trial summary. Some jurors were told that a black male student was accused of hitting a white male student, then the races are reversed in the version told to other jurors. All mock jurors were asked to decide if the defendant was guilty or not guilty, and then, using a nine-point scale, to rate their confidence in this verdict as well as the strength of the defense and prosecution cases. Finally, mock jurors were asked to choose a sentencing option for a person found guilty of assault. The nine options ranged in severity from probation to four years in prison.

When the data were in, Sommers and Ellsworth learned that nearly three-fourths of all mock jurors found the defendant guilty; in this there was no significant difference between male and female jurors. In the race-salient component, the defendant’s race made a slight difference to mock jurors (69 percent convicted the white defendant; 66 percent found the black defendant guilty). The largest difference in conviction rates came in the non-race-salient component, where all-white mock jurors convicted the black defendant 90 percent of the time but the white defendant only 70 percent of the time.

The data also showed that when race was *not* a salient component of the case, mock jurors consistently gave higher ratings to the strength of the prosecution’s case than to the defense’s, and higher ratings to their confidence in their own verdict. When race was

salient, however, mock jurors gave lower ratings to the prosecution, higher ratings to the defense, and indicated less confidence in their own verdicts.

From these findings, Sommers and Ellsworth concluded that white juror bias is alive and well whenever there is no obvious racial component to a case against a black defendant. The researchers also suggested that one way to mitigate such antiblack bias is to ensure that all juries include black jurors.

Although attractive defendants seem to have an advantage, researchers have indicated that this situation relates only to such crimes as rape, robbery, and other offenses involving theft.²² For

Although attractive defendants seem to have an advantage, for types of crimes where someone apparently relied on PA in furtherance of a crime, being good-looking can cost a defendant dearly.

other types of crimes, and in particular those where someone apparently relied on his or her own PA in furtherance of a crime, being good-looking can cost a defendant dearly.

In a 1975 experiment, researchers Harold Sigall and Nancy Ostrove presented sets of mock jurors with a mythical case in which a female defendant was accused, variously, of swindling an unmarried man by convincing him to give her \$2,200 to invest in a nonexistent company, or, alternatively, of breaking into his

home during the hours of darkness and making off with the same amount of cash.

Half the participants were led to believe that the female defendant was attractive, while the others believed that she was unsightly. True to the PA stereotype, when it came to burglary—a crime where the perpetrator tries not to be seen—the more attractive defendant received a less punitive sentence than that given to the unattractive defendant.

So, when a person uses his or her own elevated PA to help commit a crime, jurors are unlikely to exercise leniency.

There may be no better example of this phenomenon than the infamous case of Ruth Snyder. In the small hours of March 20, 1927, with assistance from her lover, Judd Gray, she killed her husband, Albert Snyder. Ruth and Judd first bludgeoned Albert with a cast-iron window sash weight, then had to finish him off by first

strangling him with picture wire before finally stuffing a chloroform-soaked cloth in his nose.

Then—quietly, so as not to wake her sleeping nine-year-old daughter—they ransacked the house to give the appearance of a burglary gone wrong. Before leaving, Judd tied Ruth up and left her in the hallway to give credence to her claim to police that she had been attacked by two “giant Italians.”

Police didn’t buy it. Ruth was thirty-two, gorgeous, voluptuous, and had a reputation as a party girl who wasn’t too particular about whose bed she woke up in. Albert was forty-six, not much to look at, an assistant art editor at a motor-boating magazine, a hardworking, low-paid homebody. And, oh yeah, a few weeks before the “attack of the giant Italians,” Ruth had tricked her husband into buying a new life insurance policy that paid twice the normal death benefit if Albert died violently.

Detectives didn’t have to lean too hard on Ruth to get a confession. It was, she said, all Judd’s doing. She found him irresistible; she was crazed with desire and had to have him. Judd insisted that they kill Albert, and he was relentless, and when she could no longer put him off she gave in and unwillingly went along.

Judd, a corset salesman, was soon in a cell—but telling another story: Ruth was the irresistible one. She had ensnared him with her steamy sexuality and manipulated him into killing Albert. She was the mastermind, he just another victim.

The press mined this gold for every nugget they could dredge up. Ruth and Judd were tried together. Although the venue was New York City, justice moved with the alacrity of a frontier town. The trial began less than thirty days after the murder, and for the next three weeks, fed by the tabloid press and the emerging medium of radio, America followed with fascination as Judd and Ruth took turns testifying about each other’s viciousness. The trial was attended by songwriter Irving Berlin, film pioneer D. W. Griffith, and the producers of *Chicago*, a Broadway musical about women doing prison time for murder.

The jury debated a mere hundred minutes before finding both killers guilty. A few months went by while their appeals were heard and rejected. By autumn, New York Governor Al Smith had denied

their clemency petition. The lovers perished minutes apart in Sing Sing's electric chair.

But their story lives on in American pop culture: It was the basis for James Cain's *Double Indemnity*, a novel adapted by Raymond Chandler and Billy Wilder into a film starring Fred MacMurray and Barbara Stanwyck as star-crossed lovers and Edward G. Robinson as the implacable insurance investigator who brings them to justice.

As for the real Ruth Snyder, the jury might easily have spared her life. In 1928, few New Yorkers were comfortable with the idea of executing a woman, especially in the then-new and fiendish electric chair. But, no. Ruth came to court in stylish skirts and sheer black stockings that set off her long legs. Her tightly tailored suits and blouses announced an ample bosom. She wore an immaculate coiffure and perfectly lacquered nails. She spoke in low, measured tones. It wasn't hard to see how Ruth could have wrapped first Albert Snyder and then Judd Gray around either of her sinuous little fingers. There were twelve men on the jury and they got it right away: As long as she drew breath, Ruth Snyder could get any man to do her bidding. She was poison—anyone could see it just by looking at her.²³

CHAPTER 7

Physiognomy and Public Service



*How PA influences candidates, elections, policy,
and governance*

“A clever, ugly man every now and then is successful with the ladies, but a handsome fool is irresistible.” So wrote novelist William Makepeace Thackeray, long before the communications revolution that allows the handsome to reveal themselves as fools to millions in the blink of an eye.

Thackeray wrote of success in romance, implying seduction: lovers fostering feelings that make the object of their affections feel comfortably desirous about surrendering their bodies, their entire being, to the seducer.

What are modern electoral politics if not campaigns of seduction? Isn't an election much like a courtship, where several

candidates, instead of competing for the opportunity to pass their genes along through a single mate, vie for each voter's affection, for the opportunity to pass their *ideas* and policies along? If you examine the process, rather than the result, isn't the real objective of an election to get voters—objects of the candidates' desire—to surrender their vote?

Physical attractiveness isn't just important in the sexual arena. Candidates for political office have great concern about optimizing their PA, too. And the higher the office, the greater the concern.

America's last PA-challenged president was elected in 1860. Tall and gaunt, Abraham Lincoln had gigantic hands and feet; oversized ears; asymmetrical features that included a too-prominent nose; gnarled, yellowish skin; thick, unruly hair; an awkward, almost comical gait; and a penchant for careless dress. His appearance inspired churlish jokes and childish ridicule, and not merely among children.

America's last PA-challenged president was elected in 1860.

For example, on March 27, 1861, just three weeks after Lincoln's inauguration, after establishment of the Confederacy but before open warfare began, *London Times* reporter William Russell was waiting in an anteroom when the new president entered. Russell confided to his diary that:

Soon afterwards there entered, with a shambling, loose, irregular, almost unsteady gait, a tall, lank, lean man, considerably over six feet in height, with stooping shoulders, long pendulous arms, terminating in hands of extraordinary dimensions, which, however, were far exceeded in proportion by his feet. He was dressed in an ill-fitting, wrinkled suit of black, which put one in mind of an undertaker's uniform at a funeral; round his neck a rope of black silk was knotted in a large bulb, with flying ends projecting beyond the collar of his coat; his turned-down shirt-collar disclosed a sinewy muscular yellow neck, and above that, nestling in a great black mass of hair, bristling and compact like a ruff of mourning pins, rose the strange quaint face and head, covered with its thatch of wild, republican hair, of President Lincoln.

The impression produced by the size of his extremities, and

by his flapping and wide projecting ears, may be removed by the appearance of kindness, sagacity, and the awkward bonhomie of his face; the mouth is absolutely prodigious; the lips, straggling and extending almost from one line of black beard to the other, are only kept in order by two deep furrows from the nostril to the chin; the nose itself—a prominent organ—stands out from the face, with an inquiring, anxious air, as though it were sniffing for some good thing in the wind; the eyes dark, full, and deeply set, are penetrating, but full of an expression which almost amounts to tenderness; and above them projects the shaggy brow, running into the small hard frontal space, the development of which can scarcely be estimated accurately, owing to the irregular flocks of thick hair carelessly brushed across it. . . .

A person who met Mr. Lincoln in the street would not take him to be what—according to the usages of European society—is called a “gentleman,” and, indeed, since I came to the United States, I have heard more disparaging allusions made by Americans to him on that account than I could have expected among simple republicans, where all should be equals; but, at the same time, it would not be possible for the most indifferent observer to pass him in the street without notice.¹

Although a principled man and a brilliant orator, Lincoln had never held national office. He won the presidential election of 1860 only after America’s dominant political parties, the Democrats and the Whigs, split themselves along geographical lines over that very issue, while Lincoln’s new Republican Party, firmly committed to ending slavery, remained united.

Even so, had most voters been exposed to his physical appearance in the modern manner, it is doubtful that Lincoln could ever have won national office. When he stood for election, however, neither television nor motion pictures had been invented and periodicals of his era were incapable of reproducing photographs. Consequently, few voters actually knew exactly what Lincoln looked like, though many had seen drawings or read newspaper accounts.

We live in different times. On television and the Internet, information circles the planet at a furious pace. Video footage of anyone

aspiring to high office is ubiquitous. In such a media environment, PA is more than important—it is vital. As Michael Deaver, an aide to President Ronald Reagan and an enormously successful presidential

We live in different times. Video footage of anyone aspiring to high office is ubiquitous. In such a media environment, PA is more than important—it is vital.

image manager, famously observed, “In the television age, image sometimes is as useful as substance.”²

But what, exactly, is image?

Image is more than PA. It is both truth and lie, both accurate perception and the gap between reality and perception. It is neither policy nor substance but linked to both. Image is deposited in the ATMs of public consciousness

picture by picture, slogan by slogan, slowly gathering value and accruing interest in the bank of public opinion.

Ultimately, our image of the president encompasses his character, talents, worldview, style, family life, and reputed sexual behavior. It includes his use of language, speaking voice, repertoire of facial expressions, and most important, his physical appearance—which in our media era sharply limits who can even be considered a serious candidate for president.³

Consider what happened to H. Ross Perot when he ran for president in 1992. A natural leader who had been elected battalion commander and president of his class at the U.S. Naval Academy, Perot was a brilliant salesman and manager who built a billion-dollar company from scratch, a self-made mogul without even a hint of scandal in his life. When his employees were trapped in revolutionary Iran, he spent his own money to hire mercenaries to rescue them. Patriot, shrewd businessman and innovative manager, loyal and decisive leader, Perot was one of the best-qualified people ever to seek the presidency.

But he was short. Very short. He had jug-handle ears. He spoke in a squeaky Southern accent. Although he wore expensive suits, they never looked as good on him as they did on taller rivals. When Perot debated on television, instead of mouthing meaningless but easy-to-recall slogans, he used charts and graphs to make his points. He appealed to people’s intellect instead of their guts. He ran against two tall, handsome, well-spoken men and was lampooned

without pity by editorial cartoonists from coast to coast. He got a mere 8 percent of the vote.

While America reputedly boasts the world's most obese population, our last truly fat president was the 320-pound William Howard Taft—elected in 1912. In today's America, however, a man that big, regardless of qualifications, has a hard time winning election even to a local office.

Consider the predicament of Montgomery County Executive Douglas Duncan, political leader of Maryland's largest county. Since winning a first term in 1994, Duncan, who stands six-feet-four-inches tall, had steadily gained weight, creeping upward toward 300 pounds. Not only did this have health ramifications—he has a back problem—but he was very aware that voters seemed to want candidates who resemble network news anchors—trim, healthy-looking, and thick-haired. “If Duncan hadn't put on the brakes, he'd be in danger of entering the Taft Zone,” a *Washington Post* columnist wrote.

His predicament was driven home during his initial campaign for county executive, when an elderly Leisure World resident, on the way to cast her ballot, stopped and peered up at him.

“What's your name?” she asked.

“Doug Duncan,” he replied. “I'm running for county executive.”

“Well, I'm voting for you, you big, fat Irishman!”⁴

Thinking about this encounter later, Duncan decided that he might gain a few votes from those who fancy obese Irishmen, but in general he didn't want to be the Big Guy, which is little guy speak for “fatty.”

Late-nineteenth-century American politicians were Big Guys and proud of it. As America expanded, so did its leadership. After the Civil War, America boomed; and the most obvious measure of a man's prosperity was the circumference of his trousers—to the point where bursting-at-the-collar politicians were caricatured by the cartoonist of the era. The manly example of virile American manhood was king-size razor blade mogul King C. Gillette. It was barrel-chested financier J. P. Morgan. It was vest-stretching politician Chester A. Arthur.

Power corrupts, as Lord Acton noted. After the inevitable scandals, “industrialists” became “robber barons,” while politicians were “fat cats” sucking “pork” from the public “larder.” When, one by one, the political bosses were pulled from their pedestals, it did not escape public attention and the new illustrated periodicals that New York’s Boss Tweed, Boston’s legendary James Michael Curley, and a host of lesser scoundrels were, to a man, unusually well fed.

“Fat politicians are at a particular disadvantage in modern America,” says Jeremy Mayer, a Georgetown University professor. “Baldness, ugliness, and even excessively hirsute eyebrows, à la Mike Dukakis, are forgivable sins, because . . . they are beyond the control of the politician. Weight, rightly or wrongly, is seen in America to be a personal, and even a moral, failing.”⁵

So when Duncan decided that he wasn’t cut out to be the Big Guy, he followed a well-worn path trod by Massachusetts Senator Ted Kennedy, who every six years, just in time for the election, sheds a little of his extra adipose, and President Bill Clinton, who assiduously lost twenty pounds just before his 1996 campaign. Duncan went on a diet, upped his exercise regimen, and sculpted just enough weight from his image to get reelected.

In our media-driven era, image is everything.

In America, estimates of the prevalence of bald or mostly bald men over thirty-five years of age range from 40 percent to 70 percent. Yet the last president without a good head of hair was Dwight

Eisenhower—elected in 1952. Of the sixteen men who sought a major party’s presidential nomination in 2000 and 2004, none was overweight and all were follicularly gifted.

Since the campaign of John F. Kennedy, the first to make regular use of television in a run for the White House, the trend toward greater presidential PA is clear. The last four chief executives (Ronald Reagan, George

H. W. Bush, Bill Clinton, and George W. Bush) were far more attractive men than those who preceded them: Lyndon Johnson, Richard Nixon, Gerald Ford, and Jimmy Carter.

Of the sixteen men who sought a major party’s presidential nomination in 2000 and 2004, none was overweight and all were follicularly gifted.

So vital is it to inside-the-Beltway movers and shakers that political success rest on something less brainless and amoral than simple physical attractiveness that no less a political powerhouse than Senator John McCain could say with a straight face that “Washington is a Hollywood for ugly people. Hollywood is a Washington for the simpleminded.”⁶ (McCain, of course, has a much younger, looks-like-a-movie-star second wife.)

In reality, looks count for a lot in politics.

But don’t take my word for it.

Look at what Professor James N. Schubert witnessed in Romania during a sabbatical from Northern Illinois University. Along with a University of Bucharest biologist, Schubert was studying the political dimensions of the AIDS epidemic. As it happened, Romania was holding national elections at the time, so each of sixteen presidential candidates got equal time on state-run Romanian TV, to the point where almost nothing else was on the tube. Schubert, who teaches political science, found himself watching endless speeches in a language he doesn’t understand.

Out of boredom, he videotaped the candidates, and when the election was over, he was struck by the way each candidate’s looks correlated with how they fared in the popular vote.

These conclusions, however, were based on his own, unscientific appraisal of each candidate’s PA. To validate these impressions, he designed an experiment. In 1997 and 1998 he showed still pictures and silent videotapes of Romanian candidates to groups across America and Asia. Schubert then asked study participants to rate the candidates’ electability. To Schubert’s continuing amazement, the winners of the Romanian election were also winners with test subjects. Candidates who *looked* the most electable were the most often elected.⁷

In other words, voters don’t much care what’s in the box as long as it’s wrapped well. It’s all about packaging.

Or is it?

With help from research assistants, Schubert began to dissect the winning faces, measuring cheekbones, chins, eyebrow ridges, and facial symmetry. His conclusion: Most people, regardless of culture, like male leaders with pronounced lower jaws, sharp

brow ridges and cheekbones, and receding hairlines. Tough and strong more than handsome. Schubert calls this look “facial dominance.” Think Charlton Heston. Think Steven Seagal. Think Arnold Schwarzenegger.

Turning his attention to American politicians, Schubert focused on forty men and women running for Congress in the 1999–2000 races. He asked test subjects to rate the electability, competence, compassion, honesty, likability, leadership ability, attractiveness, and facial dominance of candidates based solely on photos and video of the candidates. His data showed that attractive candidates rated high on such visceral qualities as compassion and likability. Unless, of course, they were *too* attractive; then many voters wrote them off as eye candy. And once again, those with dominant faces rated high on competence and leadership.

“People aren’t aware of it; they don’t understand they’re doing it,” says Schubert. “These are implicit stereotypes . . . when you have little political *issue* information, the kind of information people [do] have access to is what they see in three-second sound bites on the evening news.”

In the 2004 U.S. presidential election, hunky North Carolina Senator John Edwards scored high in attractiveness but low in facial dominance. Most people gave him high marks on such qualities as honesty and compassion, but Edwards had to work hard to overcome that baby face, constantly reminding crowds that he was fifty years old, mature and experienced, an able leader.

At the other end of the PA scale was Dennis Kucinich. In the media he was often compared to an elf, a troll, a hobbit, a UFO pilot, and runner-up for most likely to resemble a Home Depot manager. Schubert categorized Senator John Kerry, the eventual Democratic candidate, as the lonely resident of a sort of facial no-man’s land, rating neither high nor low on dominance or attractiveness. “He is not distinguished,” Schubert opined.

But then there was the former NATO commander and retired general Wesley Clark. Proud owner of the most classically dominant face, he initially led the large field of Democratic candidates for the party nomination. But not for long.

Wait. So it isn't just packaging, after all?

No. Not *just* packaging. Other factors also affect voters' decision-making processes. Even so, as Schubert says, "People are more likely to pay attention to an Edwards than a Kucinich."

One factor that mitigates Schubert's findings is the duration of a political campaign. Unlike in Romania, where campaigning is limited to a few weeks before the election, American presidential campaigns run on for well over a year. General Wesley Clark established a following based on facial dominance early in his campaign, when people knew very little about him. Months later, however, after voters had had ample time to hear and read where he stood on various issues, they decided that facial dominance alone wasn't sufficient, although a determined minority of image-conscious voters kept Clark's hopes alive in the primaries long after most candidates had dropped out—until the very end.

In a short campaign, however, like the one preceding California's gubernatorial recall election of 2004, things might have turned out differently for Clark. In California, hundreds of candidates sought to replace the highly unpopular Governor Gray Davis, a thin, bland, pleasant-looking man.

While Davis had a hard-earned reputation as a brilliant political strategist, a perfect storm of events in part beyond his control, including widespread electrical power shortages, created a groundswell of dissatisfaction with what voters perceived as poor governance. In an ordinary election, Davis would have had an opportunity to explain his policies. But this was a short election. The electorate, as in Romania, had to rely on its gut.

Davis "projected incredible weenie-ism," according to marketing guru Rob Frankel, author of *The Revenge of Brand X*, who told a newspaper reporter for *San Francisco Chronicle* that "anybody who knows Gray Davis knows he's anything but a weenie—he's a fierce, and I do mean fierce, political fighter. But his coloring is off-balance, he's completely without contrast, he has what we euphemistically call an anal retentive stance—trying to squeeze an olive with his buttocks—his shoulders back, his hair groomed back. It all said he was inaccessible."⁸

The winner of the recall election, by an overwhelming margin, was a movie actor with no previous political experience but possessing near-perfect facial dominance and great media presence: Arnold Schwarzenegger.

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In a similar manner, in 1997 members of the National Rifle Association (NRA), which functions primarily as the political lobbying arm of the firearms and ammunition industries, selected actor Charlton Heston as first vice president. Two years later, at age 76 and displaying the symptoms of Alzheimer's disease, Heston was elected president and was soon the most visible member of the organization.⁹ That Heston was far past the peak of his mental powers was vividly shown in Michael Moore's 2002 Academy Award-winning documentary *Bowling for Columbine*, in which Moore shows up uninvited at Heston's home, convinces the elderly actor to participate in a videotaped interview, and in so doing demonstrates Heston's tenuous grasp on reality and inability to think clearly.

Nevertheless, as long as he could mount a stage, wave aloft an antique flintlock rifle, and mouth his trademark slogan, "From my cold, dead hands," Heston was everything the NRA needed in its president: a tall, handsome man with a dominant face, stage presence, and a resonant voice. A man who motivated the rank and file to work toward organizational goals. A man who, despite diminished mental faculties, looked every inch the hero.

• • •

While Professor Schubert stumbled into his initial observations on PA's political muscle, he was neither the first nor the best-known social scientist to make the connection.

Shawn Rosenberg, director of graduate political psychology at the University of California, Irvine, has been exploring the collision of PA and politics for more than fifteen years. When local politicians in surrounding Orange County first got wind of his research, however, they ridiculed it as "moronic."¹⁰

Rosenberg asked hundreds of subjects to rate real and fake politicians—using only photographs—on competence, trustworthiness, leadership ability, and political demeanor. He concluded that even when candidates weren't especially attractive, they could significantly boost their ratings by manipulating hairstyle, makeup, facial characteristics, camera angles, and clothing. The boost—up to 17 percent for women candidates and 18 percent for men—spanned every political party and was not affected by a candidate's positions on key issues.

Rosenberg tells students that most people think they have a sense of what competence and trustworthiness look like, based on images that are pervasive in our culture. His research showed that U.S. voters liked light eyebrows, almond-shaped eyes with a lot of curvature in the upper eyelid, thin lips, light complexions, broad or round faces, and short hair combed back or to one side. For men, dark, formal clothes are best. Formal blouses and lightly contrasting jackets are best on women, and simple necklaces and earrings work better than no jewelry at all.¹¹

“Physical appearance is a significant part of the election equation for voters,” says Rosenberg. “Although people will never admit it, appearance can rival issues in the decision-making process.”¹² These days, Orange County politicians take Professor Rosenberg's work very seriously.

Another factor for candidates, especially men, is their height, which Rosenberg theorizes is related to the issue of perceived dominance. Others believe that height may also be an expression of our ancestors' evolutionary survival strategy. When a large, hungry bear wants to evict your clan from a cave, which guy would you expect to have the best chance of driving him away?¹³

The so-called “Presidential Height Index”—an unscientific analysis of presidential hopefuls since the dawn of the TV age—shows that the tallest candidate won the most votes in every White House race except a few: In the 1976 contest, five-foot-nine-inch Jimmy Carter beat six-foot Gerald Ford. Ford, however, suffered the handicap of having pardoned disgraced former president Richard Nixon. Even Al Gore (six feet one inch) earned more popular votes than George W. Bush (five feet eleven inches) in 2000.

The 2004 Democratic primary offers a good example of how height dovetails with the phenomena Professor Schubert first observed in Romania. In that election year campaign, Schubert, unable to understand what rival office seekers said about the issues, picked the eventual winner on the basis of overall dominance.

The seven men who emerged from the pack as Democratic hopefuls were in general agreement on most issues confronting America, and they especially agreed that the Republican president was not doing a good job. Where the candidates differed was on who could best lead the country toward solutions to those issues. In speeches and televised appearances, they were all saying the same things: Elect me and I'll do the best job. A few months into the primary campaign, as far as any differences that the average Democratic voter could see, the candidates might as well have been speaking Romanian.

The tallest candidate was John Kerry, who at six feet four inches towered over his rivals. John Edwards was next tallest at six feet. Al Sharpton was five feet eleven inches; Wesley Clark, five feet ten inches; Howard Dean, a shade under five feet nine inches; Joe Lieberman, about five feet eight inches; and Dennis Kucinich, the shortest, stood at five feet seven inches. Because the media habitually mentioned it, several candidates found their height a sensitive issue. For example, much was made of Kucinich's small stature. Lieberman, too, was considered to be altitude-challenged. Moreover, the combative former governor of Vermont, Howard Dean, took great umbrage at a *New York Times* story describing him as "diminutive." Dean insisted that he was almost five feet nine inches, then backed off and settled on five feet eight and three-quarters, then quickly added that he doesn't usually get into the fractional inch thing because it suggests he's touchy about his height, and he's not.

So who won the most delegates?

The tallest man, Kerry. Followed by the next tallest, Edwards. Followed by Clark. Though he's an inch shorter than Sharpton, a black man with a reputation for stirring the racial pot, Clark was white and a retired four-star general and actually stood a chance of getting elected.

The general election was a very long and bitterly partisan campaign. George W. Bush, the incumbent president, defeated the much taller John Kerry. Bush not only benefited from holding office during wartime, but also from proxy groups that effectively, if not always truthfully, attacked Kerry's stature as a war hero. He also had a highly motivated voter base that responded to his campaign. All this rendered traditional if unspoken height issues less relevant. Even so, Kerry won more votes than any Democratic presidential nominee before him.

Many voters won't bother to consider any candidate's positions on the issues until and unless they perceive the person has sufficient PA and media manners to be "electable" based on attractiveness and manner. They presume good-looking politicians are smarter than ugly ones, and they see them as more poised, effective, and sociable.

"Voters will refer to the looks of candidates not as factors in their decisions but as reinforcers of their decisions," insists Roberta Ann Johnson, professor of politics at the University of San Francisco. "Nobody says, 'I voted for Schwarzenegger because I liked his movies.' Instead, they'll say he's a man of action who will get things done—never mind that they drew that impression from the characters he plays in his films."¹⁴

But while attractive candidates are rated as more competent, honest, and compassionate, and as having more leadership ability than their more homely rivals, appearance holds less sway with people who pay great attention to politics, especially those who could be fairly described as policy wonks or ideological die-hards.

To summarize: A candidate's PA matters far more to swing voters with loose party identification who pay little attention to politics than it does to die-hard conservatives, liberals, or progressives. "Traditionally, voters have a shocking lack of information about the candidates' records . . . so they vote on character. And to discern character, they look to

"Traditionally, voters have a shocking lack of information about the candidates' records . . . so they vote on character. And to discern character, they look to appearances."

appearances,” says Rosenberg. “In a sense, we fall back on the most readily available strategy, but the least accurate [one].”¹⁵

• • •

If, as Rosenberg suggests, many, if not most, voters cast their ballots in response to a visceral impression of a particular candidate’s abilities—an impression based on the office seeker’s PA, including facial dominance and height—does that open the door to trickery and image manipulation? Could winning office in the TV and broadband Internet era be as simple as creating a winning image by enhancing or changing what nature provided?

That’s a subject that has long been of interest to Dr. Caroline Keating, a psychologist at Colgate University. Her research has focused on understanding the elusive quality called “charisma.” Keating investigates skills, traits, and motives associated with social dominance and leadership. Working with colleagues and student collaborators, she has discovered or confirmed earlier research that we humans convey dominance through facial expressions much like those of other primates.¹⁶

To learn how voters are affected by perceptions of a candidate’s PA, Keating set up an experiment. She began by digitizing facial images of presidents Clinton, Reagan, and Kennedy, then digitally manipulated the images to test whether subtle feature alterations were powerful enough to shift social perceptions of them. Based on previous research, she expected that exaggerating the so-called “facial maturity cues” (tiny details around the edges of major facial features) would lead to shifts in a viewer’s perception of “power,” defined as the combination of dominance, strength, and cunning, and “warmth,” including honesty, attractiveness, and compassion.

Each of these familiar presidential faces was altered to seem younger by enlarging eyes and lips, or made to seem more mature by reducing the sizes of these features. Keating’s test subjects, who were undergraduate students, then rated a single version of each face. While these subjects were not aware of Keating’s digital manipulation of features, they were affected by them. The first trial, which featured younger or “neotenous” features on a face that once belonged to President Bill Clinton, made him appear more honest and

attractive, even to subjects who had not voted for or supported his candidacy in the 1996 election.

The second study manipulated the features of John F. Kennedy, one of the youngest U.S. presidents, to make him appear more mature and hence apparently more cunning. Manipulated images also made Ronald Reagan, America's oldest president, appear less powerful and less warm. Younger features reduced participants' power ratings for both Kennedy and Reagan. In contrast, making Clinton appear younger increased his ratings of honesty and attractiveness without diminishing perception of his power. Keating and her colleagues concluded that even subtle alterations of facial features could be used to manipulate the social perceptions of familiar political leaders.

In view of these findings, one has to wonder how long it will be before politicians get regular surgical makeovers, perhaps in response to polling information about public perceptions of their looks. Maybe that's already happening.

One has to wonder how long it will be before politicians get regular surgical makeovers.

Keating also discovered that as a group or class, the socially powerful display great acting talent, and the most persuasive leadership performances begin with a leader convincing himself. As a species, she concludes, humans are so invested in facial expression that "if leaders chose to mislead us, their deceptions" are "very difficult to detect."

Finally, let's test Rosenberg's assertion that a person's looks are the least accurate way to gauge his character. One of the most recent studies in this area was conducted by a team lead by Jaume Masip of Spain's University of Salamanca. Dr. Masip, whose field is social psychology, teamed with Drs. Eugenio Garrido-Martín and Carmen Herrero-Alonso, both psychologists at U. Salamanca, to see if an individual's perceptions of the truth of a written statement were influenced by the facial characteristics of its source. In all, 270 undergraduates were shown photos of three people—an adult but "baby-faced" individual, a child, and a mature adult or older person—along with a written statement that was either truthful or deceptive but in all cases was attributed to the person in the photograph.

As researchers had hypothesized, when statements were accompanied by a photo of a baby-faced adult, participants tended to judge them as truthful. The response to photos depicting a child was completely the opposite, however: Participants tended to judge the child's associated statements as deceptive.

On the average, the accuracy of all these character judgments hardly differed from chance—which is to say that if participants had flipped a coin instead of looking at photos, they would have been correct almost exactly as often.

On the other hand, subjects who made judgments (whether correct or not) about baby-faced individuals—but not about the others—felt very strongly that they had made the right choice, especially when they believed the statement was truthful rather than deceptive.¹⁷

From all this it seems obvious that if American voters took the time and expended the effort to ascertain a candidate's qualifications and positions, if we all went to the polls armed with issues instead of impressions, we might actually elect the candidates best qualified to represent our interests. As we will see in the next chapter, however, few interests are quite so compelling as how things look.

CHAPTER 8

Seeing Is Believing



*How media messages shape PA thoughts
and feelings*

When he was four, Ben Mann of Los Angeles was already such a big fan of the space shuttle that he announced his intention to work for NASA when he grew up. One morning in August 2005, his mother allowed him to watch television while he ate breakfast so that he could see the *Discovery*, under the command of retired Air Force Colonel Eileen Collins, land at nearby Edwards Air Force Base. It was the first shuttle landing of Ben's lifetime, and he was very excited. After he had eaten and while his mother was dressing him for preschool, she asked whether, when he grew up and joined NASA, he would prefer to work at Mission Control or if he might instead want to go into space as a shuttle pilot.

Ben looked confused. “I thought only girls could do those things,” he replied.¹

Ben looked confused. “I thought only girls could do those things.”

At his tender age, Ben had never seen a picture of a male shuttle commander. He had never heard a man’s name associated with that very particular job description. And so he knew, as utterly as children know things, that the role of space shuttle commander belonged to a woman. Of course, little Ben was dead wrong: Colonel Eileen Collins was the *first* woman to command a shuttle. Her predecessors and peers were men.

While Ben’s mother immediately set him straight on issues relating to astronaut pilot gender, this tiny episode serves to illustrate just how powerfully the media, and especially television, influences the individual viewer’s paradigm, creating the set of cultural expectations that everyone uses to navigate society or his or her particular part of the world.

And it’s not merely the news. Or only in America. It’s anywhere and everywhere in the global community where people are immersed in a torrent of media images.

In this early part of the twenty-first century, as it has been for quite a while, media messages are both ubiquitous—hundreds of cable television channels, thousands of magazine titles, tens of thousands of videos and books, over a billion Web pages—and saturated with pictures of physically attractive people.

Does repetitive exposure to such images influence our expectations? Our self-respect? Our cultural references? Scientists around the world have studied this phenomenon for decades. One study by a respected quartet of Florida academics, which concentrated on the effects of media messages targeting children with images about beauty, produced some surprising data.

Researchers analyzed thousands of media messages in magazines, books, videos, and television shows, searching for messages relating to body image. The data showed that messages emphasizing the importance of physical appearance and portraying body stereotypes are present in many children’s videos, consistently reinforcing analogous messages throughout most all media. Among the videos

they examined, researchers found the most body-image-related messages in *Cinderella* and *The Little Mermaid*, and the least in *The Indian in the Cupboard* and *E.T.*

Children's books, and in particular those with illustrations, were almost uniformly filled with body-image-related messages. *Rapunzel* had the most, while only *Ginger* and *The Stinky Cheese Man* had no such image-related messages.²

In postindustrial societies, however, people of every age—but especially the young—get most of their information about the world from television. And if there is one rule governing media images that everyone agrees upon, it is that sex sells.

No group is more aware of this fact than the advertising community. Those who create advertising, those who sell it, those who buy broadcast time or printed-page space to sell their products, services, or ideas, as well as political operatives, media consultants, psychologists, and educators—all are well aware that sexual images are important message enhancers.

Others, however, including many in academia, are concerned that such advertising places inappropriate pressure on people to focus on their appearance. For example, in a recent survey by *Teen People* magazine, 27 percent of responding girls felt that the media pressured them to have a perfect body.³

Sure, but teenagers are always complaining about something. What about mature women? In 1996, Saatchi & Saatchi, then one of the world's biggest international advertising agencies with offices in dozens of cities around the world, conducted a poll to see how women perceived the ways in which they were portrayed in ads. Among their many findings was that advertising, which in previous generations aimed to make women feel guilty about having a dirty house, now makes women fear becoming old or unattractive.⁴

Other research suggests that advertising adversely affects many women's body image, which may lead in turn to unhealthy behavior as they strive for the inappropriately ultrathin body idealized by the media (more on this topic in Chapter 9).

Advertising images also promote and idealize a male standard that resembles a bodybuilder rather than the sort of fellow you'd expect to find repairing Ford pickups, building houses, or selling

insurance. As a result, men and boys are becoming more insecure about their physical appearance. Researchers are observing in men an alarming increase in obsessive weight training and the use of anabolic steroids and dietary supplements that promise bigger muscles or more stamina.⁵

A study by Dr. Harrison Pope and colleagues at McLean Hospital, an affiliate of the Harvard Medical School, suggests that this pressure to “bulk up” is felt very early in childhood. Pope sees the

The increasing muscularity of toy action figures is seen as an alarming trend that sets unrealistic ideals for boys in much the same way that Barbie dolls are suspected of providing to pre-adolescent girls.

increasing muscularity of toy action figures as an alarming trend that sets unrealistic ideals for boys in much the same way that Barbie dolls are suspected of providing unrealistic ideals of thinness to preadolescent girls.

“Our society’s worship of muscularity may cause increasing numbers of men to develop pathological shame about their bodies. . . . Our observations of these little plastic toys have stimulated us to explore further links between cultural messages, body image disorders, and

use of steroids and other drugs,” says Pope.⁶

According to various media reports, while 90 percent of teenagers with eating disorders are girls, some experts believe that cases involving boys are steadily increasing but remain underreported because few males are willing to acknowledge a medical condition that is usually associated with females.⁷

Such possibilities aside, most media images stressing thinness are directed at women. Today, the average American woman sees between 400 and 600 advertisements every day; by the time a girl is seventeen, she has received about 250,000 commercial messages. Only 9 percent of these commercials include a direct statement about beauty, but many more implicitly emphasize its importance—especially those aimed at women and girls. One study of Saturday morning television found that half the toy commercials aimed at girls made reference to physical attractiveness—but none of those that targeted boys contained even a single PA reference.⁸

Other studies found that half the advertisements in teen girl magazines and 56 percent of television commercials aimed at female

viewers used beauty as a product appeal. This constant exposure to female-oriented advertisements may give girls reason to become self-conscious about their bodies and even to equate their PA as a measure of their worth.⁹

American publishers began using pictures of beautiful women to sell magazines in the late 1890s. They began with illustrations, and later, as publishing technology advanced, turned to photographs. The former medium reached its zenith in 1905 with illustrator Charles Dana Gibson's portraits of the incredibly lovely Evelyn Nesbit, a sixteen-year-old naïf married to one of the world's richest men. She was destined for heartbreak and poverty, but when her likeness appeared on magazine covers, she was billed as the "most beautiful woman in the world."¹⁰

Color photography as a basis for mass marketing arrived in the third decade of the twentieth century and soon replaced more expensive and less lifelike hand-drawn illustrations. The women photographers selected to pose for advertisements and other commercial images could no longer be ordinary women, however, thanks to the physics of cramming the image of a three-dimensional figure in a two-dimensional space. Unlike illustration, where the artist can modify reality, photos omit the impression of depth while adding the illusion of increased width; the screen or page upon which photographic images are displayed is close to flat and doesn't allow for binocular ("two-eyed") human vision, which after processing by our brains allows us to perceive depth, the third dimension. Flattened by the camera, an average model appears heavier on a screen or a page. The preferred solution is a thinner model, who when photographed looks like a person of average weight.

As a rule of thumb, photographing the average human tends to add about 10 percent to the person's apparent width. So, a 200-pound man looks like a 220-pound man; a 120-pound woman looks like she weighs 132 pounds. But that's only part of the story.

Clothes look better on thinner people because they hang closer to vertical; there are fewer wrinkles and they appear closer to the two-dimensional design from which they originated. Through a century of advertising images, however, thinness gradually became the standard of feminine beauty. The typical fashion model today is

not 10 percent lighter than her “normal” feminine counterpart but *23 percent lighter*. So the average American woman between eighteen and thirty-four years of age has only a 7 percent chance of being as slim as a fashion or runway model. Now invert this ratio: A typical fashion photographer’s model is slimmer than 93 percent of women her age. Escalate to a so-called “supermodel”—someone whose name is known outside the advertising industry—and you have a creature slimmer than 99 percent of women in her age group.¹¹

But I’ll make this wager: Ask any supermodel’s mom if she’s comfortable with how her daughter looks, and if she’s a good mother and tells the truth, she’ll confess that she wished her daughter would eat just a little more.

Nevertheless, so pervasive and powerful are media images that more than two-thirds of girls interviewed in one study said that magazine models influence their idea of the perfect body shape.¹²

But why do advertisers, who have total control of every ad they sponsor, down to the last comma in the text or script, every wrinkle in a garment, or even the placement of a “mole” on a model’s face, so often present such unrealistically thin women to hawk their products?

Some researchers believe that advertisers use models with abnormally thin bodies and beautiful faces to create an *unattainable* desire, because trying to realize the impossible drives product consumption more than trying to attain a realistic goal. “The media markets *desire*,” says Dr. Paul Hamburg, a psychiatrist with the Harvard Medical School. “By reproducing ideals that are absurdly out of line with what real bodies really do look like . . . the media perpetuates a market for frustration and disappointment. Its customers will never disappear.”¹³

Whether or not Hamburg’s thesis is correct, advertisers have found the thin look fattens their bottom line: The North American diet industry generates between \$34 billion and \$50 billion in annual revenue, or upwards of \$1,000 for every adolescent and adult on the continent.¹⁴

Women frequently compare their bodies to those they see around them, and researchers have found that exposure to idealized

body images lowers women's satisfaction with their own attractiveness. In fact, a 1984 poll by *Glamour* magazine concluded that three-fourths of responding women thought they were "too fat." A larger and more scientific 1997 study found body dissatisfaction increasing at a faster rate than ever before among both

Researchers have found that exposure to idealized body images lowers women's satisfaction with their own attractiveness.

men and women. Nearly nine of ten of the study's 3,452 female subjects wanted to lose weight.¹⁵

Yet another study found that people who viewed slides of thin models rated their own PA lower than people who viewed average and oversized models.¹⁶

Registered dietitian and researcher Cindy Maynard believes that body image dissatisfaction is so epidemic in our society that it's almost considered normal, adding that even children in "third grade are concerned about their weight." The most vulnerable, she explains, are teens who are at the impressionable age when people begin to develop self-confidence and self-perception. "About half of female teens think they're too fat," says Maynard, adding that almost as many are dieting. "There is a lot of pressure to succeed, to fit in. One of the ways to fit in is to have the perfect body." Women and girls who responded to Maynard's Web survey indicated overwhelmingly that "very thin" models made them feel insecure about themselves.¹⁷

But what about women of color?

The ideal of feminine beauty as portrayed on American television is blue-eyed and thin, writes Dr. Carolyn Stroman, who teaches social science at Howard University's School of Communications.¹⁸ What effect does watching an endless parade of such women have on the psyches of young girls who can never hope to look like Britney Spears? What becomes of African American women, for example, as they grow to adulthood bombarded, almost exclusively, with this "all American" beauty ideal?

They "are immediately excluded from what is considered to be 'beautiful,'" writes researcher Karen Perkins of Australia's Key Centre for Cultural and Media Policy. "They have little to no hope of achieving these ideals. As a consequence, historically along the

broad spectrum of devaluation of all women, black women have been doomed to the lowest status.”¹⁹

Perkins’s study of television images showed that black females have been deeply and profoundly affected by the politics of skin color, hair texture, and facial features. Their feelings related to self-worth, intelligence, success, and attractiveness are warped by what appears to the greater society as benign and arbitrary physical traits.

It follows that what Perkins describes as an “insurmountable gulf between herself and the societal beauty ideal” has an adverse effect on self-esteem. According to Perkins, one study of sixty-six black college women found that 36 percent desired a lighter skin color; less than half that number wanted darker skin.

Stroman’s 1991 study documented that young African Americans watch a great deal of television.²⁰ Yet to be studied in depth, however, are the effects of television’s idealized and exclusionary media images on the self-perceptions and psychological well-being of African American women. The Perkins study suggests that until those questions are answered, parents of young black girls should limit their children’s television viewing time and substitute interactive activities for TV watching. When parents do allow their children to watch television, they should watch with them and afterward discuss the program’s hidden messages. Perkins also recommends that

parents push for more responsive media in their respective communities.

When parents do allow their children to watch television, they should watch with them and afterward discuss the program’s hidden messages.

As it happens, that’s pretty good advice for all mothers, not just those with dark-skinned children. In 1997, Mary C. Martin and James W. Gentry, professors at the University of Nebraska–Lincoln, created an unusually complex study to examine what happens when young girls—both adolescents and those some-

what younger—are exposed to pictures depicting lovely women in advertisements. Martin and Gentry conjectured that since models used in advertising are selected as image examples of ideal beauty, adolescent girls would compare themselves to these models and find the models to be their superiors in terms of physical attractiveness. They further supposed that if a girl attempted to judge the value or

worth of her own PA or body image against that of an advertising model, comparisons are likely to result in lowered self-perceptions and lowered self-esteem.

Previous research by Martin suggested that the interval between the fourth and eighth grade, a time when female bodies go through dramatic changes, is when most girls develop lasting self-images and when adult definitions of beauty become relevant to them as social norms. So, for this new study, Martin and Gentry selected 268 girls all enrolled in the fourth, sixth, and eighth grades of a Midwestern public school (mean age: just over eleven years, nine months), and 261 of them completed the tasks. The girls lived in a region of the country where, in 1997, 98 percent of the population was white and the median annual family income was just over \$31,000.²¹

The researchers were careful to note that while their subjects were not representative of all U.S. girls their age, they did represent a segment of the population that other studies had found was most susceptible to eating disorders and other problems linked to PA issues.²² As an incentive to participate, Martin and Gentry's study subjects took part in a drawing for two prizes of \$50 each. In addition, \$500 was donated to the local public school system.

The girls who served as test subjects were told that the study was to learn about how people respond to advertising. During a classroom session held at its usual time, students were shown three ads for personal adornment products; then their teacher read aloud a set of questions based on these ads. The girls were asked to fill in questionnaires that rated their own self-perception of PA, body image, and self-esteem. A control group answered the same questions but was shown ads without pictures of models.

For this study, four-color advertisements were created by cutting and pasting from ads in *Seventeen*, *Sassy*, *Teen*, and *YM* magazines, the four leading teen U.S. periodicals at the time. These magazines were selected for a second reason as well: They all maintain consistency with respect to the type of beauty they present.²³

Full-body photos of models from ads and other partial pictures of models were cut from real magazines in a way that eliminated information about their respective sources. These pictures were then used to create ads for fictitious brands of such commonly advertised

products as lipstick, jeans, and hair-care products. The ads were very simple and appeared to be professionally executed.

To ensure that the girls tested saw the models in the ads as highly attractive, test subjects were first asked to rate the models in the ads from “very overweight and out of shape, fat” to “very fit and in shape, thin,” and from “very unattractive, ugly” to “very attractive, beautiful.” The test subjects responses ranged from 5.1 to 6.4 on a seven-point scale, far above the midpoint value of 4, confirming that the girls perceived the models as highly attractive.

Before seeing a set of ads, the girls were shown a drawing of “Amy looking at an advertisement in a magazine” and heard a story about “Amy” comparing herself with a model in an ad. Amy acted for one of four particular reasons, which social scientists call “manipulated motives.”

- *Self-Evaluation*. Amy was comparing her own PA with that of models in ads to determine whether she thinks she’s as pretty as or prettier than the models with regard to such specifics as hair, eyes, and body.
- *Self-Improvement*. Amy was comparing her own PA with those of models in order to find ways to improve her own attractiveness in such specifics as hairstyle and makeup.
- *Self-Enhancement (1)*. Amy was comparing her own PA with the model’s so as to enhance her self-esteem by finding specific areas in which she is prettier than the model.
- *Self-Enhancement (2)*. Amy was discounting the model’s beauty in order to avoid explicit comparison of her own physical attractiveness with that of the magazine model. This reason was presented as an attempt by Amy to protect/maintain her self-esteem.

After looking at the drawing of “Amy” and hearing the four reasons (“motives”) why she looked at the ads, the girls were asked to look at the ads as Amy had viewed them. That brought them to the heart of the study: After viewing each ad, girls were asked to list specific ways in which the so-called “manipulated motive” might

have happened. For example, when self-improvement was the motive, the girls were asked to look at the model and “list ideas you get on how to improve your looks.” The study’s intent, of course, was not to gauge naturally occurring motives for social comparison, but rather to look at how the use of various motives changed the girls’ reactions to looking at pictures of pretty models.

If a girl completed this listing exercise, the manipulation was considered successful. One of the study’s authors analyzed each response to the listing exercise and coded the result to show if the girl succeeded or failed to complete it.

When a girl listed a specific reference to aspects of physical attractiveness she had compared in the ad and gave no indication that another motive was present, it was considered a successful exercise. An example of success in manipulating the self-improvement motive was if a girl listed the ideas she got from looking at the model in the ad: “Use the product. Get a perm. Wear lots of makeup and have as pretty of a face as she does.”

Not all the girls bought into the study’s premise. For example, when they were asked to list “ways in which your hair, face, and body look compared to the model’s hair, face, and body,” one girl wrote, “She looks different because I am a different person. I don’t really compare to her.” Such responses were discarded. In all, seven girls were dropped from the study for failing to complete the listing exercise.

For the final analyses, fifty-one girls (19.5 percent) self-evaluated; fifty-four (20.7 percent) self-improved; fifty-one (19.5 percent) enhanced through downward comparisons; fifty-one (19.5 percent) self-enhanced by discounting the beauty of the models; and fifty-four subjects (20.7 percent), the control group, viewed ads without models.²⁴

The Martin-Gentry study yielded hundreds of pages of quantifiable data that the researchers massaged into several tables. For our purposes, however, we need look only at the broad outlines of their findings. As expected, they learned that girls view their bodies differently at different ages; exactly why this is so and how it works in individuals and groups was not a study objective, but the findings help to explain why girls react differently to media messages about

their body as they grow up. For example, the fourth graders' self-evaluations produced the lowest self-perceptions of physical attractiveness and the highest (i.e., most skinny) self-perceptions of body image when compared to other "motives." Martin and Gentry suspect that in childhood, girls, like boys, want to get "bigger," and bigger is perceived as being the opposite of skinny.

By the time they are sixth graders, however, girls compare themselves to models and see themselves as too chubby; they want to be skinnier. Perhaps, speculate the researchers, somewhere between

Martin and Gentry suspect that in childhood, girls, like boys, want to get "bigger." By the time they are sixth graders, however, girls compare themselves to models and want to be skinnier.

fourth and sixth grade a mental transition occurs from "bigger is better" to "skinnier is better."

Among all the girls studied, only fourth graders were able to raise their self-esteem by finding features of their own appearance that they could compare favorably with those of the models. The opposite occurred, however, when fourth graders discounted the model's beauty; when that happened, they also lowered their

own self-esteem. Martin and Gentry speculate that this might be because fourth graders are so young that they have not realized that they will probably not grow up to be as beautiful as a model.

Overall, the Martin-Gentry study seems to suggest that teachers and parents could use the framework of social comparison to teach children and adolescents about how and when to compare themselves to others. Because previous studies have shown that young girls do not naturally use the self-enhancement tool when comparing themselves with models,²⁵ getting educators involved would be helpful in teaching young girls how to bolster their self-esteem. If that were to happen often enough, then, as that earlier research suggests, advertisers would have a less socially damaging avenue for peddling their wares, because making consumers feel more physically attractive actually encourages sales of cosmetic and other adornment products.

But is the use of highly attractive models in advertising really the most effective way to sell products and services? Or would advertisers be more likely to convince buyers by using people who looked more like themselves—normal people, in other words?

A few years ago Dr. Amanda Bowers, who teaches marketing at Louisiana State University, and Stacy Landreth, then a doctoral candidate at LSU and now an assistant professor at Villanova University's College of Commerce, sought to find out if using highly attractive models (HAMs) instead of more ordinary-looking people in advertising was truly the most effective way to sell products. They were not the first to tread this road. Several studies that sought to investigate the positive effects of including HAMs in advertising had failed to make a strong case supporting their use.²⁶

Bowers and Landreth sought to explore the differences between using HAMs and normally attractive models with different types of products. Their research also explored methods by which matching model attractiveness and product type influenced advertising effectiveness. They began with the long-accepted supposition that selling different types of products often requires directing the sales message to different groups of people. For example, few men purchase such feminine beauty products as lipstick and eye shadow, so an effective sales pitch would address the concerns of women but ignore those of men.

In addition, because the beautiful are often perceived as having better and easier lives with fewer problems than so-called "normal people,"²⁷ Bowers and Landreth supposed that ads for "problem-solving products," such as dandruff shampoo or acne treatments, would be more effective if the associated model was closer to normal looking.

They also supposed that even with differing products that might appeal to a wide range of potential buyers—soft drinks and foot-care products, for example—the sales pitch would be less enhanced by a beautiful model in the ad than if viewers perceived the model as possessing some expertise about the product. If their premise held up, then an advertiser selling a home insecticide, for example, would be better served by choosing a model who resembles the sort of person likely to use that product—a housewife, perhaps, or an exterminator—than a very pretty model. And if the product was one associated with illness, such as an over-the-counter pain reliever or facial tissues, then a model who appeared to be ill or otherwise uncomfortable—and therefore not attractive—might be the most effective.

In setting up their study, however, Bowers and Landreth took care to avoid comparisons between models with high PA and those who were *unattractive*; several earlier studies have covered that ground. Instead, they sought to differentiate between responses to the sort of models described in previous research as “idealized and unrealistic, haunting images of perfection” and so-called “normally attractive” models, which they defined as of average or moderate weight, height, and facial beauty and more representative of a real woman, attractive but not beautiful. In short, the sort of woman whose picture might grace a woman’s magazine in the “makeover” department.

The study sought to learn if matching models that were either “highly attractive” or “normally attractive” with specific types of products influences ad effectiveness either directly, by using a model chosen to make unspoken “arguments” for the product, or indirectly, through the model’s perceived credibility.

Bowers and Landreth first conducted two “pretests” to guide them in their choice of products and models. Twenty-five young women were asked to put a list of products into categories; they chose acne concealer and acne medicine to represent the problem-solving category. Next, the same group used a similar process to choose lipstick and earrings as “enhancing” products.

In a second pretest, two judges selected full-color model photos from popular women’s magazines. Photos intended to represent “normally attractive models” were selected from Reader Makeover issues featuring moderately attractive women with professionally styled hair and makeup. Two undergraduate classes totaling seventy-two students viewed five photos of normally attractive women, and then sixty-five students in two other classes evaluated five highly attractive model photos. The HAM photo was selected on the basis of the model’s extreme beauty and the subjects’ previously expressed beliefs that the beautiful model led a less-than-normal life. The normally attractive photo was chosen for its rating of moderate beauty and the fact that the students strongly believed this woman led a “normal” life. Both models had the same hair and eye color.

The main study was based on the opinion of 251 women of an average age of twenty-two; 83 percent were white and 84 percent

single. Each subject was given a folder with instructions, an ad including the different products and models, and a questionnaire. Subjects were told to open the folder, view the ad as they would normally view one in a magazine, and then respond to the questions.

The researchers' expectations generally were supported by the first study, suggesting that advertisers should consider that while highly attractive models are usefully associated with enhancing products, there is no advantage in using them to sell "problem-solving products." The study data suggest, instead, that advertising effectiveness is linked with the viewer's beliefs about the model's expertise with a particular problem-solving product.

Bowers and Landreth also concluded that viewers' impressions of a model's beauty had little relation to how much they trusted her; a picture of an extremely beautiful model was perceived as equally trustworthy as that of a woman of average looks.

To validate the results of their first study, Bowers and Landreth conducted a second, almost identical study using different models and different products. This time perfume was the enhancing product, and the problem-solving product was a dandruff shampoo. The same questionnaire was given to a single group of 145 young women ranging in age from seventeen to twenty-two; 99 percent of them were white. Subjects within each row of desks viewed the same ads while those in adjacent rows were shown a different ad.

As in the previous study, subjects were asked to indicate the degree to which they saw themselves as similar to the women in the ads, how important they felt the product was to them personally, and how committed they felt toward buying it.

Again, one of the advertising models was significantly more attractive than the other; subjects rated the latter model as having a much more normal life than her beautiful counterpart. They also found dandruff shampoo much more important than perfume to solving their own problem.

Contrary to what the researchers expected, for those subjects who felt the product was personally important to them, the highly attractive model was perceived as somewhat more trustworthy than the normally attractive model—perhaps because attractive people

are often seen as acting from their own feelings without being influenced by others, while unattractive individuals are seen as more easily coerced.²⁸

For those subjects who felt that the product was not something they needed, however, model PA had no significant effect on perceptions of trustworthiness. Nor did the subject's perception of how similar her life was to that of either model.

As for how subjects perceived a model's expertise, the data again surprised the researchers. Except for those subjects who felt the product was one they needed, the model's PA made little difference to perceptions of expertise with the product. Those who did feel involved with the product, however, accorded more credibility to the higher-PA model.

Bowers and Landreth concluded that while high-PA models are effective in selling attractiveness-relevant products, they are no better than normally attractive models in selling problem-solving products. They also concluded that marketers need to consider the type of product carefully when selecting a model to hawk it. Finally, to no academic's surprise, they also suggested that more research is needed.

A somewhat more comprehensive study by Hilda Dittmar and Sara Howard of the University of Sussex, Brighton, United Kingdom, sought to replicate earlier findings that showed no difference in advertising effectiveness when the models were thin or of average size. Specifically, they sought to refute the assertion by a spokesperson for Premier Model Management, which represented supermodels Naomi Campbell and Claudia Schiffer, among others, that "statistics have repeatedly shown that if you stick a beautiful skinny girl on the cover of a magazine you sell more copies," and that model agencies merely supply the women their clients, the advertisers, demand. "The [advertisers] would say that they are selling a product and responding to consumer demand," continued the spokesperson. "At the end of the day, it is a business, and the fact is that these models sell the products."²⁹

Dittmar and Howard recruited seventy-five women from a London-based fashion advertising company and an equal number of secondary school teachers; about 95 percent of both groups were

white. The women in advertising were involved in the creation and promotion of fashion images in administrative, design, or secretarial capacities and had a combined average age of 28.2 years; the teachers had an average age of 37.2 years. Within each group, a third of the women were shown images of thin models, a third images of average-size models, and the remaining third, the control group, ads without pictures of a model.

For this study the researchers created ads for eau de toilette packaged in a perfume flask in one of two “brands” called Water Lily or Red Zest. An image of a red-colored forest was placed behind the Red Zest bottle, while a crashing wave was the backdrop for the Water Lily bottle. Each flask was accompanied by images of women taken from fashion magazines. The models were chosen as examples of the thin ideal—each model’s waist circumference was about twenty-four inches and she would fit a U.S. size 2 dress (U.K. size 8).

These same body images (but not the model’s head and face) were then “stretched” laterally 25 percent with Adobe Photoshop to represent women of more normal weight. Both models had long hair, which was used to mask the “join” area where a stretched body was joined to its unstretched head. The resulting “normal” models corresponded to women with a thirty-inch waist who would fit U.S. size 12–14 (U.K. size 14).

To confirm that the models were perceived as having different body sizes and that the manipulation of body size did not affect the models’ perceived attractiveness, twenty professional women were recruited for a pilot study to rate either the two thin or the two average-size models. Each model was rated on six-point scales, one measuring body size and the other attractiveness. Analysis of body size ratings confirmed that the thin images were perceived as much thinner than the average-size models, while the attractiveness ratings showed that the model in the Water Lily ad was rated as slightly more attractive than the Red Zest model. More critically, this pilot study also confirmed that the thinner models were not seen as more attractive than the average-size models, which is to say that changing the model’s apparent body size did not influence her perceived attractiveness.

For the main study, respondents were asked to complete three questionnaires designed to assess whether they 1) internalized the ideal of a thin body, 2) perceived different types of ads as effective, and 3) experienced body-focused anxiety after viewing these ads.

Ideal body internalization was assessed by a series of eight questions, with respondents being asked to indicate agreement with statements such as “I believe that clothes look better on thin models.”

Advertising effectiveness was assessed through five questions measuring attitudes toward the ad. Attitude toward the brand and purchase intention was covered with a single question: “If (Brand X) costs the same as the brand that you usually use, how likely would you be to purchase (Brand X) on your next shopping trip?”

Body-focused anxiety was assessed with an eight-item form that asked the women to indicate the degree, if any, of anxiety associated with various weight-related areas of their own body.

Data thus created were evaluated, and the researchers drew several conclusions from them:

- Ads showing attractive average-size models were perceived as equally persuasive as those depicting very thin models, a finding equally true for both teachers and fashion advertising workers.
- Although women in advertising were slightly more critical of all the ads than were teachers, this reaction had no linkage to the model’s size.
- Only women who internalized the ideal “thin” body as a personal standard felt anxiety by viewing the images. They showed the most anxiety after viewing thin images and the least anxiety after looking at average-size images.
- This anxiety effect was far more extreme in the teachers than the women working in advertising. The continual exposure to the thin ideal and professional association with thin fashion models may inoculate women working in the industry against these images making them feel bad about their body; even so, the negative impact of thin images on body-focused anxiety

was still present, but to a lesser degree. When advertising women viewed the women of more normal appearance, however, they experienced no anxiety at all.

Dittmar and Howard concluded that it is the thinness of the models used in advertising, and not their attractiveness, that creates anxiety in susceptible women viewers.³⁰

These were not the only studies on this subject. Researchers in advertising and marketing organizations, whose job it is to gauge the public pulse, now suspect that many women resent ads that insist on presenting unattainable beauty as the norm, and to some extent, the media, and especially advertisers, have warped the public's sensibilities about feminine beauty.

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In an effort to ascertain women's sensibilities, Dove, one of the beauty brands owned by Unilever, a behemoth multinational manufacturer of consumer products, commissioned a broadly based and far-ranging study. The stated purpose was to explore empirically what beauty means to women today and why. Dove also wanted to assess methods of talking and thinking about female beauty in ways that were more authentic, satisfying, and empowering.

To enhance credibility, Dove hired Dr. Nancy Etcoff, a Harvard University professor and author of *Survival of the Prettiest*, and Dr. Susie Orbach, visiting professor at the London School of Economics and author of *Fat Is a Feminist Issue*, as principal investigators, with data managed by New York-based StrategyOne, an applied research firm.

Their study, "The Real Truth About Beauty: A Global Report," was published in September 2004. In all, 3,200 women aged 18 to 64 were interviewed between February 27 and March 26, 2004. The women came from ten countries: the United States, Canada, Great Britain, Italy, France, Portugal, the Netherlands, Brazil, Argentina, and Japan.

The report concluded that while few women consider themselves victims of bad looks, and most women are not lost in despair and self-loathing about their looks, few women feel the power and pride of beauty. In fact, according to the data, most women see themselves as below average in appearance, and almost half regard themselves as overweight. Only 2 percent claimed to be beautiful.

In their introduction, these researchers hastened to add context to these findings by citing several other studies that suggest that people in Western cultures (but *not* those of East Asia) rate themselves as “better than average on everything from kindness, intelligence, and popularity.” They also rated their parenting, driving, and workplace skills as above average. In fact, “average” is an unusually low rating for such self-evaluations in Western societies.

The Dove study, however, shows that women are less satisfied with their beauty than with almost every other dimension of life, except their financial success. It calls for lifting what the report terms “the quota system on images of beauty,” arguing that tall, thin statures; blond hair; fair skin; and blue eyes should not solely define contemporary good looks. The authors opine:

The diversity of human beauty has been strained through a sieve of culture, status, power and money, and what has emerged is a narrow sliver of the full panorama of human visual splendor. Beauty is diverse and the human eye thrills to new pleasures and fresh sources of inspiration.³¹

More than 100 years earlier, in 1871, Charles Darwin wrote analogously and prophetically about varying determinants of beauty:

“If all our women were to become as beautiful as the Venus de Medici, we should for a time be charmed; but we should soon wish for variety; and as soon as we had obtained variety, we should wish to see certain characters in our women a little exaggerated beyond the then existing common standard.”³²

In a foreword introducing the Dove report, coauthor Orbach concludes that women “want to see the idea of beauty expanded.” She explains that survey data suggest that women perceive qualities

of character and individuality and that the emotional component of personality is as much an expression of beauty as the “narrow physical aspects of beauty that currently dominate popular culture.”

Perhaps paradoxically, Orbach adds that women nevertheless want to be perceived as *physically attractive*, that their looks are important to how they feel about themselves and how they regard beauty in others.

It may be that men think about beauty in a narrow, linear manner linked to physical attractiveness, while women see beauty in many dimensions. In any case, Orbach concludes that the Dove-sponsored study shows that women also regard being beautiful “as the result of qualities and circumstance: being loved, being engaged in activities that one wants to do, having a close relationship, being happy, being kind, having confidence, exuding dignity and humor. Women who are like this look beautiful. They are beautiful.”

The study itself concludes that even when strictly considering only PA, “images of manufactured femininity are rejected as being too narrow, as inauthentic and as insufficient.” The study suggests that women want broader definitions of how female PA is depicted. Three-fourths of those surveyed said they wanted much more diversity; they wanted to see images of women of different shapes, in varying sizes and of a broader range of ages than those presently saturating the media.

Orbach also offers her own take on why and how such feminine dissatisfaction has evolved. Over the last half-century, she notes, beauty both as an idea and as an ideal has migrated around the world, and what was once the “exclusive province of the Hollywood dream factory, of fashion models and the young bride,” is now an essential attribute for women of all ages. Meanwhile, as ordinary women seek to claim beauty for themselves, “there has been an insidious narrowing of the beauty aesthetic to a limited physical type—thin, tall—which . . . excludes . . . millions of women.”

Finally, Orbach concludes, democratizing the idea of beauty while, at the same time, sharply limiting its definition has caused women considerable anguish. While most women believe that PA is important, even crucial to finding their place in the world, they feel that conforming to media representations of idealized beauty should

not require them to resort to such extreme measures as cosmetic surgery.

In short, according to the authors of “The Real Truth About Beauty,” women around the world would like to be considered beautiful no matter their shape, color, size, or age. Women, few of whom think of themselves as physically attractive, insist that PA is only one dimension of beauty, and that they should be valued for the beautiful qualities of their other dimensions. They want to enjoy

Women, few of whom think of themselves as physically attractive, insist that PA is only one dimension of beauty, and that they should be valued for the beautiful qualities of their other dimensions.

the benefits of being considered beautiful and resent the media for narrowing beauty’s definition to that of physical attractiveness.

There are, in fact, many things that the media could do to broaden its portrayal of beauty stereotypes. But whether the gatekeepers who have the power to do so will agree remains in doubt. Beauty’s less visual qualities are far more difficult to present on page or screen.

Nevertheless, Dove has taken a small step in that direction by incorporating some of the study findings into an unusual and attention-grabbing advertising campaign. Pretty, underwear-clad women of varying ages, all noticeably heavier than typical fashion or advertising models, were featured on billboards and in other advertising promoting Dove lotions and related products. As Dove undoubtedly had hoped, they became a minor sensation, guesting on NBC’s *Today*, appearing in a *People* magazine cover story, and sparking opinion articles in major publications, including the *New York Times Magazine*.³³

It’s worth noting, however, that while these Dove Girls did not conform to the fashion model’s silhouette, they all had clear skin, lustrous hair, and symmetrical features. In the unlikely event that any of them would ever need to be “fixed up” with a blind date, there is little chance that she would be touted to an eligible man in terms of her peerless personality.

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The media’s influence on American attitudes on physical attractiveness is not, of course, limited to the advertising sphere. Television, especially, provides Americans with idealized images of

manhood and womanhood as a component of both entertainment and news programs.

Television as a mass medium was first demonstrated at the 1939 New York World's Fair but did not become publicly available until after World War II. Probably because they were familiar with the use of attractive females on magazine covers to attract readers, the first television producers also used pretty young females to attract viewers. Highly attractive stage or film actresses, usually in full evening dress, announced commercial breaks or delivered program continuity information. Often the women on early television were mere ornaments who silently showed off products on game shows, for example. By the late 1940s, as television's first dramatic programs emerged, the new medium emulated the motion picture industry by presenting women as glamorous objects.

In other words, nothing much has changed.

Today, entertainment programming dominates every station's schedule, a mix of feature films, made-for-TV movies, hour-long dramas, half-hour sitcoms, and so-called "reality" shows. For the most part, all of these programs feature highly attractive actors and actresses, especially in leading roles. With a few notable exceptions, less attractive actors are almost always relegated to supporting roles as comedic foils, dramatic villains, or incidental cast members. In fact, one well-regarded study showed that only 12 percent of prime-time characters were overweight, much lower than the actual percentage of the general population.³⁴

No dimension of a television performer's PA is more notable than weight. As previously noted, all people tend to look somewhat heavier when viewed through a camera lens. So it is an extraordinary event when overweight actors are cast in lead roles. Notable examples are John Goodman and Roseanne Barr, who starred in *Roseanne*, a sitcom about a lower-class family struggling with life's essential problems. Until this show appeared on ABC in 1988, Barr was known only as an acerbic stand-up comedienne. Goodman's credits had been limited to a succession of brief supporting roles until he was cast as her husband, Dan Conner, a character conceived as the straight man, feeding the star lines that set up her jokes. The show lasted ten seasons, an extraordinary run, and when it signed

off for the last time, Goodman's dramatic talents were widely recognized and his career took off.

But that is not usually what happens for overweight actors cast in sitcoms. Dr. Gregory Fouts, a professor of psychology at the University of Calgary in Alberta, Canada, has studied television for decades. He analyzed the content of two randomly chosen episodes from each of eighteen prime-time sitcoms. Fouts examined body weights for thirty-seven central female characters (92 percent were white, the remainder black), negative comments they received from male characters about their weight or bodies, and audience reactions following the negative comments. He found that, collectively, thin women and girls were overrepresented in these shows; that the heavier the female character, the more frequently and significantly negative comments were made about or to her; and that these negative comments were significantly associated with audience reactions or laughter.

And in earlier research Fouts and colleague Kimberley Burggraf had learned that situation comedies show male characters making positive comments to women according to their body weight: The thinner the woman, the more positive comments she receives.³⁵ Fouts concluded that sitcoms as a class of programs present males making derogatory remarks about heavier women's weights and bodies, with this reinforced by audience laughter.

He also concluded that the combination of presenting thin actresses in most roles and making derogatory remarks about those who are overweight "likely contributes to the internalization of gender and weight stereotypes which deleteriously affect the health of female adolescents."³⁶

But that's about women. Do sitcoms perpetuate the same stereotypes about overweight men? To learn if they did, Fouts conducted a follow-up study. His researchers watched one episode each of the twenty-seven different sitcoms that were available in the Calgary area in February 1999. Fouts observed seventy-five male roles (97 percent white, 3 percent black) identified as central characters who appeared weekly and whose actors were listed consistently in the show's main credits. Fouts and his researchers coded each male

character's body weight, the frequency of negative references received from female characters regarding his body weight/shape, the frequency of negative self-references regarding his own body weight/shape, and the frequency of audience reactions to these negative references.

These negative references included, for example, such lines as "You're too fat to wear that in public," and "I'm surprised you could find a belt that fits you." They also included comments by the character himself, such as "I need to go on a diet," and "Geez, this is tight!" There were also negative behavioral references, such as a female character giving the male character a disapproving up-and-down glance or grimacing while pointing a finger at his stomach, or a male character looking with disapproval at his image in a mirror.

Audience reactions were coded by examining each negative reference and determining the presence or absence of an auditory audience reaction such as laughter or "ooh" sounds immediately afterward.

The data Fouts collected showed that 33 percent of the male characters were below average in weight, 54 percent were average, and 13 percent were above average. The 13 percent contrasts with the actual prevalence rate of above-average weight men in North America (approximately 30 percent, according to the U.S. National Center for Health Statistics and the National Institutes of Health). Overweight males are underrepresented in sitcoms and present an inaccurate picture of men's bodies in our society. A previous study by Fouts, however, found that only 7 percent of female sitcom characters were overweight while about one-fourth of North American adult women are considered to be of above-average weight.³⁷

All these data suggest that it is more acceptable for men than for women to be overweight on entertainment television.

Moreover, in another study in 2002, Fouts determined that while 9 percent of central male sitcom characters received negative references

These data suggest that it is more acceptable for men than for women to be overweight on entertainment television.

from female characters regarding their bodies, there was no linkage between the frequency of these negative references and either their weight or audience reactions to the negative references. Fouts concludes, then, that being heavy and male is not associated with receiving punishment by female characters; when it does occur, however, it's not reinforced by audience laughter. He also concludes that this data supports the existence of a double standard that may influence viewers' attitudes about women's and men's bodies.³⁸

But wait. If studio audiences find female fat jokes funny, doesn't that suggest, at least, that society as a whole holds a lower opinion of overweight women?

Well, yes and no.

Yes, because network executives won't keep any television show on the air unless it draws a significant audience—suggesting, in turn, that unless viewing audience beliefs are reinforced by a particular show, they won't watch it. So when audiences are exposed to a media message that female fat is funny and thin is not, unless millions of viewers to some extent incorporate such views into their own attitudes, the show will soon fail.

On the other hand, when it comes to television programs, producers leave nothing to chance, including the ostensible reactions of studio audiences. According to Larry Mintz, whose sitcom credits include writing for, producing, consulting for, or creating such sitcoms as *Mork and Mindy*, *The Nanny*, *Step by Step*, *Going Places*, *Angie*, *Family Matters*, and *Married . . . with Children*, virtually every sitcom is “sweetened” with a laugh track added in a production studio after the show is filmed. Furthermore, while most sitcoms are shot before a live audience, Mintz explains, these audiences are prepped by production personnel, encouraged to laugh at every joke punch line, and cued to applaud on command.³⁹

So when Fouts and his researchers heard a sitcom audience laughing at fat jokes, what they heard was what the show's (usually male) producers wanted them to hear and not a faithful expression of how any studio audience reacted to any particular joke.

Nor is bias toward PA absent when it comes to television news. Immaculately coiffed, professionally garbed, possessed of perfect teeth and skin, and usually a few pounds under average weight, the men and women who smile guilelessly into a television camera while reporting from the scene or reading text from a studio teleprompter seem to have been cloned from a small, multicultural sampling of idealized Americans. With remarkably few exceptions, they are noticeably better looking than most people who watch them.

Moreover, the television news emphasis on physical appearance is not limited to those who present it. Judging by the quantity of material aired almost any day, news broadcasts often emphasize stories about attractive people at the expense of those who are PA challenged.

Take crime stories: America at the millennium was a nation of nearly 300 million people. Every year, a tiny fraction of one percent of these millions—but still, thousands of people—disappear, many presumably victims of foul play. Many thousands more are raped and/or murdered. Yet few murder victims or missing persons are named in television accounts; in big cities, those few cases that do get reported rarely get more than a passing mention on local stations, even when their killers or abductors are brought to justice.

On the other hand, consider the case of JonBenet Ramsey, a six-year-old whose parents entered her in beauty contests and thus an exceptionally pretty girl, who had been photographed and videotaped in high heels, adult makeup, and professionally styled hair. When she was murdered in 1996, the media went bonkers. The crime was never solved, but even after more than ten years, images of this blonde, blue-eyed first grader in lipstick and eye shadow are still shown on network television.

And in December 2002, when Laci Peterson, eight months pregnant and beautiful to behold, went missing, her story led the evening network news broadcasts for days. Then her husband Scott, tall, handsome, and philandering, was named as a suspect in her disappearance and presumed murder. For months, television news covered the case; it became a national event. Interviews with police investigators, footage of the discovery of Mrs. Peterson's remains

and those of her fetus, and the arrest and subsequent trial of Scott Peterson filled thousands of hours on network, cable, and local television. This sordid little tale of an unfaithful fertilizer salesman murdering his pregnant wife had about as much suspense and drama as a *Perry Mason* rerun—yet a made-for-TV movie was hastily cobbled together and aired to respectable ratings even *before* Scott Peterson’s trial began.

Isolated cases of media frenzy?

Hardly.

In April 2005, young Jennifer Wilbanks got cold feet on the eve of her Atlanta wedding and hopped a plane. She turned up in Albuquerque a few days later and spun a wild tale of kidnapping and sexual assault. Pretty soon she fessed up: There was no kidnapper, no sexual assault. Jennifer just needed some head time before getting hitched, couldn’t find a way to tell her fiancé, and impulsively took off.

Surely this kind of thing has happened before. Surely it will happen again. Yet the “Runaway Bride” story was reported on network news for weeks afterward.

Why?

Because Jennifer is tall, thin, yet curvaceous. Her face is symmetrical, with big eyes and invitingly full lips. In short, Jennifer Wilbanks is one hot-looking babe.

A few weeks later, in May 2005, eighteen-year-old Natalee Holloway, vacationing in Aruba with her mother, disappeared. Foul play was suspected. Once again the evening news was saturated with Natalee stories. There was a problem, however: Even though dozens of journalists and television technicians descended upon tiny Aruba, neither they nor police were able to turn up many clues to Natalee’s disappearance. With few developments in a case that went nowhere, there was little actual news to report. Instead of dropping the story and moving on, both the major networks and larger-market stations dug in. Audiences from coast to coast were served conflicting and usually vague stories about suspects, alibis, and clues. As in the Laci Peterson case, as in the “Runaway Bride” case, there was such a paucity of facts that the networks filled valuable airtime with speculation, innuendo, and rehashes of earlier (and often erroneously)

reported facts. Almost as often, networks showed one reporter interviewing another about what they had heard or *thought* or even what they *felt* about the case.

Again, why?

Because Natalee was blonde and busty and beautiful. And the networks had pictures showing her in all her glory.

This bias toward the attractive is spreading around the developed world, and at least one European intellectual thinks it's time for a change. "Ugly people should be spotlighted in the media in the same way that the media wishes to emphasize persons from ethnic minorities," says Trond Andresen, who lectures on engineering cybernetics at the Norwegian Institute of Technology in Trondheim. Andresen told *Bergens Tidende*, a local newspaper in Norway, that journalists, photographers, and television producers discriminate against the ugly and emphasize beautiful people whenever possible.⁴⁰ This emphasis on appearance, he continued, makes young people insecure and increases their own dissatisfaction with how they look. "If I were chosen for a TV debate I would obviously be assessed by viewers—not for what I had said, but for how I looked," he added.

But why not give audiences pictures of attractive people on television? What's the harm in that?

When magazines or newspapers sell more advertising than expected, they can add pages and balance commercial pages with additional editorial content. When there is more or more important news to be reported, a newspaper can add pages or put out a special edition. But at the risk of stating the obvious, there are twenty-four hours of sixty minutes in every day, and no television broadcaster can add so much as a minute to any of those hours.

And even all-news channels such as CNN cannot possibly air stories about every event of the day's news cycle. With rare exceptions and only for catastrophic events—the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, the Indian Ocean tsunami of 2004 that killed a quarter million people and drove thousands more from their homes,

Journalists, photographers, and television producers discriminate against the ugly and emphasize beautiful people whenever possible.

or the drowning of New Orleans by Hurricane Katrina—TV stations and networks limit news programming to about an hour a day, plus a few hours weekly for such magazine-style shows as CBS's *60 Minutes*, NBC's *Dateline*, and ABC's *20/20*.

Put aside the fact that media companies reap billions of dollars from advertising revenues while getting all-but-free usage of a public asset—in this case, the broadcast spectrum. Forget that these companies are licensed to serve the “public interest, needs, and convenience,” as the federal licensing statute provides. What's important, it seems, is that the primary role of news executives is to choose which stories to air, which to omit, which to follow up, and which to ignore.

With television news viewership steadily declining, and with the federal government ignoring its former mandate that news programs contribute to fulfilling requirements for public service, news programming is now regarded as no different from entertainment programming: It is required to earn its own way. Accordingly, decisions about which stories to air are no longer made by weighing their relative news values. Decisions are made, instead, by considering each story's ratings possibilities; the more viewers a show attracts, the more the network can charge its advertisers.⁴¹

Alas, while the networks were filling news schedules and exhausting resources to transmit endless and repetitive stories about physically attractive JonBenet Ramsey, Laci Peterson, Natalee Holloway, and Jennifer Wilbanks, along with celebrities like Paris Hilton, Lindsay Lohan, and Britney Spears, they gave little or no attention to such important matters as:

- *The USS Liberty Cover-Up*. After three decades of helping to cover up an aerial attack assault by Israel on the USS *Liberty*, an intelligence vessel, that killed 37 Americans and wounded 174 crew members, Captain Ward Boston, USN, finally confirmed, in 2004, that President Lyndon Johnson and Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara had prevented an investigation.
- *The OSP Intelligence Scam*. A series of articles by a retired Air Force officer revealed that the State Department's Office of

Special Plans (OSP) had cherry-picked intelligence reports to make the case for war against Iraq, and that reporters from the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post* were manipulated into leaking the OSP's fraudulent "findings" to the public.

- *No Iraq Body Counts.* The Pentagon and the White House claimed they could not quantify Iraqi civilian and military casualties, yet have continued to release "estimates" of the size of the insurgent forces.
- *The Ban on Pictures of American Soldiers Killed in Iraq.* Apparently concerned that showing flag-draped coffins returning from the battlefield or footage of the president attending military funerals might pose reelection problems, the White House decided that the sacrifices of the fallen should be publicly ignored.
- *The Mark Rich Affair.* Is America's political class corrupted by financiers who dole out billions of dollars to bankroll political campaigns? Convicted of tax evasion, Rich fled to Switzerland and was later pardoned by President Clinton just before his term expired.
- *The Dot.com Bubble.* Promoters looted millions of dollars from IRA and 401(k) plans before the bubble burst.
- *Official Obstruction of the 9/11 Commission.* Was investigation of the attack on the World Trade Center obstructed by the Bush administration? Many people, including relatives of the victims of 9/11, believe this was the case and that the cover-up continues.
- *Absence of WMDs, Lack of an Iraq/Al-Qaeda Link, and No Evidence Saddam Hussein Had Any Connection with the 9/11 Attacks.* More than two-thirds of adult Americans were persuaded to support the Iraq War based on the belief that all of the above were proven facts after administration officials used television to make their case for war. The TV networks

eventually presented information showing that these assertions were untrue, but by then the war had gone on for nearly two years. Television also ignored reporting that when Saddam Hussein used chemical weapons during the Iraq/Iran War, American military advisers helped direct the projectiles to their targets (a story that was reported by the *New York Times*).

- *National Debt*. Tax cuts for the wealthy have added about \$700 *billion* to the national debt, by far the greatest acceleration in budget deficits in U.S. history, with enormous implications for future generations.

So what's wrong with showing pretty faces on television? In itself, nothing. But the Founding Fathers did not grant the rights that the First Amendment confers on the media in order that they stupefy the public with mindless stories about the PA-blessed. Our democracy functions because when the checks and balances of the three branches of government fail—as they sometimes do—the press, including television, bring these lapses to public attention so that voters can correct problems at the ballot box. Don't take my word for it. Here's what James Madison said: “A popular government without popular information, or the means of securing it, is but a prelude to a farce or tragedy, perhaps both.”

This observation is as true in a small community as it is in a major city. By yielding large portions of their news programs to overblown reports on the lives and times of the physically attractive, local stations leave little time to broadcast news important to their own communities, be that a school board meeting, the misdeeds of a minor public official, or the local effects of a new law. Thus, more often than not, such small but vital items are ignored by television news.

I was left to wonder, like others before me, if most television news executives believe that audiences prefer watching good-looking people to learning important facts, and if the best way to start a news broadcast is not with some unpleasant reality but with pictures of an unforgettable face or a sexy figure.

I wonder no more. Not long ago Les Moonves, who is president and CEO of CBS and simultaneously shares the same duties at CBS's parent corporation, Viacom, made it clear that he makes no distinction between news and entertainment programming. Moonves told a *New York Times* reporter that if hiring an attractive woman to read the news while removing her clothes—in short, emulating the *Naked News* show that titillates watchers in the United Kingdom—would increase news viewership, he would cheerfully do it because his job is to give audiences what they want.⁴²

CHAPTER 9

The Dark Side of Physical Attractiveness



*Anorexia, bulimia, and other beautifully
unhealthy behavior*

Pity poor Deleese Williams of Conroe, Texas. Her jaw was deformed, crooked teeth crowded her mouth, her eyes drooped, and her breasts were hard to find. At age 30, she looked back on a childhood of endless horror and ridicule by classmates and the agonizing years of an abusive marriage to a man who never let her forget that she was hard to look at.¹

Then Deleese heard about ABC Television's *Extreme Makeover* show, one of several network "reality" programs that marshal the talents of cosmetic surgeons, professional hairstylists, makeup artists, and wardrobe consultants in order to present severely PA-deficient individuals with the gift of beauty. Of course, there's more to it

than that. It's all to satisfy the prurient interests, base instincts, and vicarious pleasures of a nationwide television audience—and, ultimately, for the benefit of advertisers, whose fees feed the network's bottom line.

But never mind all that crass commercialism for now. Williams applied to *Extreme Makeover* in December 2003, an application accompanied by a mandatory full-length video depicting her worst features, the corporeal deficiencies that collectively amounted to one woman's achy-breaky heart. But the show's producers were delighted with that video: Deleese was just the sort of subject they were looking for.

Early in 2004, Williams flew to Los Angeles and met with production executives and the network makeover team. Later, describing this experience, she said that a psychologist and several physicians told her that she needed her eyes “lifted,” her ears “pulled back,” and implants not merely in her breasts but also in her chin. They also concluded that dental surgery would be required to break and then reset her jaw. But when doctors were finished, producers promised, Deleese would have a Cindy Crawford–like “Hollywood smile.” The free makeover would “transform her life and destiny.”

But first the network would let audiences see that being ugly is a tough way to get through the day. To reinforce the notion that beauty is good and its absence bad, producers sat Deleese down before the cameras and asked her to describe how her appearance had invited the ridicule that she suffered as a child and then the agonies of her abusive marriage. All that, however, still didn't quite add up to a program segment. So, according to Deleese, producers interviewed her friends and family to talk about her. Up to then, these folks “didn't notice or pretended not to notice” her looks, but once she was picked for the show, they were coached to focus exclusively on Deleese's every physical flaw.

Producers sat Deleese down before the cameras and asked her to describe how her appearance had invited the ridicule that she suffered as a child and then the agonies of her abusive marriage.

Reluctant to trash her sister, Kellie McGee tried to play up Deleese's good points. But hard-nosed producers “peppered Kellie

with questions about her childhood with the ugly Deleese . . . and repeatedly put words in her mouth.” Aiming to please the producers, Williams’s mother-in-law also laid it on thick, saying things like, “I never believed my son would marry such an ugly woman.”

While these comments never aired on TV, Williams sat squirming in an adjoining room listening and watching a monitor as they were taped.

It was tough to take, Deleese acknowledged. Every cruel word pierced her soul. But still, she thought, it would be worth it. After all, when the doctors, cosmeticians, and wardrobe folks were finished, she’d be beautiful. Everything would be better. Her life, her real life, could begin at last.

The episode announcing her selection for a mega makeover aired on January 7, 2004. It included a video emphasizing all her worst physical features. But an extreme makeover would make everything better. Deleese would enjoy a happy ending—isn’t that what the program was all about?

Hours before her scheduled dental surgery, as Williams sat alone in a Los Angeles hotel room reading preop instructions, a producer arrived and coolly informed her that everything was off. “You will not be getting an extreme makeover after all. Nothing. It doesn’t fit in our time frame. You will have to go back to Texas tomorrow,” said the show’s emissary.

Williams burst into tears. “How can I go back as ugly as I left? I was supposed to come home pretty,” she sobbed.

But Deleese was no longer the producer’s problem.

Why? How could this happen?

It seems the doctors, after considering the nature of Deleese’s surgery, had advised producers that her recovery time wouldn’t fit into the show’s schedule.

“The most tragic part is that Deleese is now too ashamed to even go out in public; she is so hurt and humiliated that she grocery shops at midnight,” said Wesley Cordova, the Houston-based attorney who filed a lawsuit on her behalf against ABC and its corporate parent, The Walt Disney Company. “She knew that they could drop her at any time, but she didn’t believe they would,” he added.

Months later, her sister, Kellie McGee, who had, however reluctantly, spoken disparagingly about Deleese and, to please the producers, revealed a long-suppressed disgust at her sister's appearance, became despondent. "Kellie could not live with the fact that she had said horrible things that hurt her sister. She fell to pieces. Four months later, she ended her life with an overdose of pills, alcohol, and cocaine," said Cordova.

Deleese's lawsuit alleges ABC breached its contract, willfully inflicted emotional distress, and was grossly negligent, which contributed to her sister's suicide. The suit claims that producers subjected her to needless humiliation and goaded Kellie into insulting her appearance. Cordova explained that while Kellie suffered from bipolar disorder, it was the experience of trashing her sister's looks that drove her to kill herself.

ABC and Disney offered condolences for Kellie's death but denied that they bore any responsibility because Williams was well aware that the network could end her participation in the show at any time. They had paperwork that said so.

While Deleese Williams's lawsuit works its way through the courts, let's consider that while her ill-fated pursuit of personal PA was tragic, the cumulative effect of the media's relentless focus on the physically attractive in pursuit of ratings or circulation has had vastly more widespread effects on American society. Beyond the tragedy of the Williams case, beyond redefining news as what happens to the best-looking people, PA-centered media messages encourage a raft of unhealthy and often debilitating conditions that threaten the health of millions.

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In America, eating disorders have become increasingly common, even in young children. Like their undernourished, famine-oppressed, Third World counterparts, people with these psychological disorders are often preoccupied with thoughts of food and weight, and they share some of the same physical and emotional

symptoms as those who have experienced starvation. Many people with eating disorders appear obsessed with food.²

Eating disorders affect people from early childhood through young adulthood and are sometimes promulgated between generations within a family. In 2003, a team led by Dr. Hans Steiner at the Stanford University School of Medicine (Division of Child Psychiatry and Child Development) analyzed data to learn that mothers with eating disorders demonstrated greater concern over their children's eating habits; by the time these children were five years old, many of them already displayed the same symptoms found in juveniles with eating disorders.³

Steiner and his team were surprised to learn that half of elementary school children wanted to weigh less, about one in eight reported attempts to lose weight, and three-fourths of these children cited their family as the primary source of dieting-related information. In addition, by age 12, nearly one in five girls and one in twelve boys had eating habits associated with fasting and dietary restraint.

There are three distinct types of eating disorders:

1. Binge eating
2. Bulimia nervosa
3. Anorexia nervosa

Binge eating, which is characterized by frequent episodes of uncontrolled eating, is probably the most common disorder. More than a third of obese individuals in weight-loss treatment programs report problems with binge eating. Bingeing is often accompanied by a feeling of being out of control and is followed by feelings of depression, guilt, or disgust.⁴

The *Gale Encyclopedia of Medicine* describes *bulimia nervosa* as a serious, sometimes life-threatening eating disorder affecting mainly young women. Bulimics binge by stuffing themselves with large amounts of food, then try to rid themselves of the food and its attendant calories by fasting, exercising excessively, vomiting, or using laxatives—purging behavior that may reduce stress and relieve

anxiety but carries an unhealthy price tag. Bulimia is often accompanied by depression and is considered a psychiatric illness.

Over two million adolescent American girls and young women suffer from bulimia and the associated bingeing and purging activity that often causes severe bodily damage. In rare instances, bingeing causes the stomach to rupture, and purging brings on heart failure from the loss of such vital minerals as potassium. Vomiting causes another set of serious problems, including acid-related scarring of the fingers (if they are used regularly to induce vomiting) and permanent damage to tooth enamel. In addition, the esophagus, which brings food from the mouth to the stomach, is frequently inflamed from exposure to stomach acids. These acids may also lead to swollen salivary glands. Other consequences of bulimia include irregular menstrual periods and severe loss of libido.

An important study of bulimics was conducted by Gary Groth-Marnat and Naomi Michel of Australia's Curtin University of Technology. They asked seventy-six current or former bulimics and a control group of thirty-seven women who had never experienced the disorder to complete a questionnaire about dissociation (a mental state in which some previously integrated part of a person's life becomes separated from the rest of the personality and functions independently) and the incidence and severity of childhood sexual abuse.

Twenty-one participants scored high on the measure of dissociation; they were asked to participate in a structured clinical interview to determine if any of them could be classified under formal criteria for dissociative disorder. Data indicated that dissociation was highest among current bulimics. Those who had put the disorder behind them were less apt to suffer from dissociation than current bulimics—but also more likely to experience dissociation than the non-bulimic control group.

Contrary to the researchers' expectations, however, there was no link between levels of dissociation and incidence of reported childhood sexual abuse. Nor was the incidence of childhood sexual abuse among bulimics higher than among the general population.⁵

Few bulimics are able to stop their behavior without professional help, and while many bulimics recognize that their actions are

not normal, they feel that they are no longer in control. Many struggle with other compulsive, risky behaviors such as drug and alcohol abuse. Such psychiatric illnesses as clinical depression, anxiety, and obsessive-compulsive disorder are also commonly associated with bulimia.

Upwards of 90 percent of bulimics are women in their teens or early twenties. While people of every race develop this disorder, most of those who receive this diagnosis are white. Frequently carried out in secrecy, bulimic behavior is accompanied by feelings of guilt or shame. Many bulimics live secret lives, outwardly healthy and successful while carefully concealing feelings of helplessness and low self-esteem.

While bulimia is usually the result of excessive concern with weight control and self-image, its root causes remain mysterious. Researchers now believe that those who suffer from bulimia are at the confluence of both genetic and environmental influences, including their participation in work or sports that emphasize thinness, such as modeling, dancing, or gymnastics. Family pressures also may play a role. One study found that mothers who are extremely concerned about their daughters' PA, and especially their weight, may contribute to causing bulimia. In addition, girls with eating disorders often have fathers and brothers who criticize their weight.

Even more dangerous is the eating disorder *anorexia nervosa*, which amounts to self-induced starvation. Most prevalent among women, anorexics recoil from their phantom fatness by refusing to eat. Even as they grow thinner and smaller, they see themselves as far too heavy. While few anorexics technically starve themselves to death, many incur life-shortening health disorders by starving their bodies of necessary nutrients.

Anorexia brings the highest mortality rate of any psychiatric illness: Somewhere between 6 percent and 10 percent of anorexics die from this condition—a higher death rate than for some cancers. Involving intense physical and emotional issues in conjunction with severe body image distortion, eating disorders are among the most challenging of all illnesses to treat.

Briefing a congressional panel, Dr. Joel Jahraus, a nationally

known expert on eating disorders, described an encounter with a lovely young woman named Anna Westin who became his patient. “[She was] twenty-one years old and full of character and charm,” he said. “She loved photography and proudly displayed her work, laughing heartily as she told me of the fun she had with her work. But while a healthy side of this young woman wanted to be there [in an eating disorders clinic], there was also a side that struggled with anorexia nervosa.”⁶

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After years of taking dozens of laxatives and diet pills daily, plus compulsively exercising for two hours each day, Anna’s body weight was dangerously low. “Her pulse was forty beats a minute and blood pressure almost imperceptible at times,” Jahraus continued. “Her mood would suddenly change and she would cry inconsolably. Her symptoms were so intense and her medical status so compromised that I immediately recommended hospitalization.”

But Anna’s insurance company balked. “I was told . . . that she wasn’t ill enough for hospitalization and that she would be approved [only] for outpatient treatment,” recalled Jahraus. After several intense discussions, the insurer relented. Doctors stabilized Anna with intravenous nutrition, then moved on to intensive psychological work and ongoing nutritional therapy. But after only five days, an insurance reviewer declared that Anna’s therapy was sufficient and she must now be treated as an outpatient. Jahraus vehemently fought this decision. When Anna discovered that her insurer was insisting that she should be an outpatient, she lost her already tenuous motivation to continue treatment. “The window of opportunity began to close,” continued Jahraus. “She told me, ‘If an insurance company isn’t approving my admission, I can’t be *that* bad!’”

A few weeks later, on February 17, 2000, Anna took her own life by intentionally swallowing an overdose of diet pills.

“Her diary spoke volumes of the torture she endured every day from the eating disorder,” explained Jahraus. “She wrote, ‘My unhappiness continues on. There really is no way to rid myself of this,

is there? And who is listening anyway? No one. My life is worthless right now. Saying good-bye to such an unfriendly place can't be as hard as believing in it every day. And essentially my spirit has fled already.'”

Hoping to help others struggling with eating disorders, Anna's parents established the Anna Westin Foundation (www.annawestinfoundation.org), dedicated to the prevention and treatment of eating disorders and to raising public awareness of these dangerous illnesses. It includes the Anna Westin House, which combines innovative treatment for eating disorders with cost-effective care. The foundation's website provides some chilling figures:

- Seven million American women and a million men suffer from eating disorders.
- Between 10 percent and 22 percent of those diagnosed with an eating disorder die as a result of that disorder.
- Between 2 percent and 5 percent of those diagnosed with eating disorders commit suicide.
- Of those suffering from eating disorders, 86 percent report its onset by age 20.
- Seventy-seven percent of those diagnosed with eating disorders suffer from it from one to fifteen years.

Treatment for eating disorders is extremely expensive. Inpatient treatment can cost \$30,000 or more per month. Outpatient care runs upwards of \$100,000 per year, according to the Westin Foundation.

Probably the most famous eating disorder case to be publicized in America was Terri Schiavo. Severely overweight as a teenager, she lost some sixty-five pounds around the time she graduated from high school. Somewhere along the line, however, fitness became her obsession, along with fasting. After a time, Schiavo limited herself to mostly liquids, drinking more than ten glasses of iced tea daily and forcing herself to vomit what little food she did eat. Much later

her family would say that while they had worried about her behavior, they had no idea how quickly her health could deteriorate or how dangerous it was to starve herself—so they neither challenged her nor sought medical help for her condition.

In 1990, Terri lapsed into a coma. According to her doctors, this condition was most likely due to an imbalance in blood potassium levels; by taking great quantities of fluids, this vital mineral was flushed out of her body. Eating would have replaced her minerals, but eating was not on Terri's mind.

She never recovered. After spending years in a vegetative state, doctors told her husband, Michael, that she was brain dead—an irreversible condition. Michael then decided to allow Terri to die by removing her feeding tube, thereby depriving her of water and nutrients. Terri's family, however, had other ideas. A lengthy court battle ensued, and one family's sad story became a national tragedy. Around the country, thousands of people who believed that Terri still possessed a degree of consciousness and might one day recover (despite the medical consensus to the contrary), or who were expressing their own deeply held religious or political convictions about the sanctity of life, lined up in support of Terri's parents and siblings, fighting to keep her alive. Asserting spousal privileges and citing her doctors' findings, Michael went to the courts seeking approval for the dignified death that he claimed his wife would have wanted.

The legal battle went on for years amid enormous controversy. Terri Schiavo died on March 31, 2005. She was forty-one.

Issues of law and faith aside, the debate over Terri Schiavo's fate made it clear that eating disorders are still poorly understood by the public. Ironically, over the last fifteen years, science has made much progress in understanding these disorders. Clinicians now know, for example, that those suffering from an eating disorder are best served by early intervention, before their health is endangered through bone loss, reproductive and heart damage, and other serious problems.

Following Schiavo's death, the *Daytona Beach News-Journal* editorialized that state and federal authorities had failed to educate the

public about eating disorders. In particular, the editorial argued, government should seek to inform teenage girls, since they are most likely to make unrealistic comparisons of themselves to media images. The editors cited research showing that children as young as five worry about their weight. “Such concern is not evidence of an eating disorder, but it betrays a greater disorder in society’s attitude toward weight, on both ends of the spectrum,” the editorial stated.

“As Americans grow more obese, the fashion models and actors who represent the ideal of physical attractiveness have become more emaciated.”

“As Americans grow more obese, the fashion models and actors who represent the ideal of physical attractiveness have become more emaciated. The unachievable ideal, combined with growing concern for health problems related to obesity, has been tied to a significant increase in the number of eating disorders, especially among school-aged children.” The editorial went on to suggest that parents and teachers should learn to recognize warning signs relating to eating disorders, and that insurance companies and public health agencies should broaden medical coverage to include treatment for eating disorders.⁷

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While anorexia and bulimia are primarily female disorders, men have their own set of problems that researchers have termed the *Adonis Complex*, a mostly secret crisis of “male body obsession.” Bombarded by idealized male physiques on magazine covers, in underwear ads, and in action movies—all of which feature men with rippling abdominal muscles and bulging biceps, deltoids, and pectorals—many men have grown increasingly insecure about their appearance.

Harrison G. Pope, Jr., and Roberto Olivardia, both physicians and professors at the Harvard Medical School, and Katharine A. Phillips, a Brown University professor, studied pumped-up male bodies from action figure toys to competitive bodybuilders, Chipendale dancers, Playgirl centerfolds, and everything in between. They concluded that the U.S. media presentation of the idealized male has become steadily more muscular.⁸

They began their study with a look at GI Joe, America's first popular action figure. In 1964, they noted, GI Joe had a respectable but unremarkable male physique. If his green plastic figure were scaled up to the height of an average man, or about five feet ten, his waist would have been thirty-two inches, his chest forty-four inches, and his arms on the small side at twelve inches in diameter—a trim, athletic, but otherwise unremarkable fellow. By 1991, however, GI Joe's waist shrank to twenty-nine inches while his arms muscled up to sixteen inches. In short, he was pumped up like a bodybuilder. Likewise, Pope and his colleagues noted that the 1978 Star Wars action figures Luke Skywalker and Han Solo were trim but otherwise unexceptional in proportion. By 1995, however, both appeared to have been pumping iron and gulping steroids.

Next, consider what your own eyes report: Fifteen or twenty years ago, if you wanted the current issue of a bodybuilding or fitness magazine, you probably had to live in a big city where you could mount an expedition to a large newsstand; even then, your choices were limited to no more than two or three publications. Today, a visit to the magazine racks in almost any U.S. convenience store or supermarket will yield half a dozen or more “physique” publications. Now look at the billboards that litter our highways or ride on the sides of city buses: They are filled with hunky, half-naked male models hawking everything from underwear to cars to consumer electronics. Buy a copy of almost any general-interest magazine and you are treated to bare male chests, rippling muscles, and tanned, chiseled, hairless torsos. The Calvin Klein underwear ads. The Soloflex man. The caped and costumed World Wrestling Entertainment performers, all bursting with steroids. There are gyms all over the place, many owned by billion-dollar conglomerates.

Male muscles, in short, are big business.

Pope and his colleagues also examined magazine ads and found that, for example, in the sixties, less than 10 percent of the male models in *Glamour* and *Cosmopolitan* appeared bare-chested or otherwise less than fully dressed. By the eighties, however, that number has nearly tripled. Along the way, male models became noticeably more buff.

In addition to doing a statistical analysis, Pope and his colleagues interviewed dozens of men suffering from what they term “muscle dysmorphia,” which they posit as a sort of “reverse anorexia.” One of their subjects was “Kevin,” whose body bulged with muscles in places where most men don’t know they have muscles. Kevin nevertheless believed that his arms were “sticks.” Unwilling to chance encountering someone who might disrespect his physique, he became a near recluse. Then there was “Scott,” an obsessive bodybuilder whose compulsive commitment to working out cost him his ladylove. On any beach in any country, women would melt at the sight of Scott’s rippling muscles—but he was convinced that he looked puny and so he never went near a beach, refusing to display his unclad body out of morbid embarrassment. A man named “Barry” was so disgusted with his “fat” body that he starved himself down to eighty pounds. “Ben,” likewise convinced that he was way too fat, surrendered to twice-weekly food binges, swallowing six or seven giant double burgers, an entire fried chicken, and several pounds of fries, then washing it all down with milk shakes—and then forcing himself to vomit up every last bite into a toilet.

Pope, Olivardia, and Phillips conclude that Kevin, Scott, Barry, and Ben are “the tip of the iceberg.” American men are being manipulated through the media, “indoctrinated” by exposure to more supermuscular images than any previous generation has ever encountered, all in service to the “male body image industries”—that is, the purveyors of food supplements, diet aids, fitness programs, hair-growth remedies, and countless other products. These industries, the researchers note, “prey increasingly on men’s worries, just as analogous industries have preyed for decades on the appearance-related insecurities of women.”

“For every severe or dangerous case,” say Pope and his colleagues, “there are dozens of less severe cases—men who cope quietly with emotional pain about some aspect of how they look.” PA concerns in boys and men “range from minor annoyances to devastating and sometimes even life-threatening obsessions—from manageable dissatisfaction to full-blown psychiatric body-image disorders.”

While muscle dysmorphia seems limited to males, its near relative is not so particular. Body dysmorphic disorder (BDD), formerly termed “dysmorphophobia,” was described in psychiatric literature from around the world for over a century but studied systematically in the United States only since the mid-1990s. BDD manifests as an intense preoccupation with an imagined or slight defect in one’s appearance and seems to arrive during adolescence or young adulthood. BDD often coexists with such other psychiatric conditions as social anxiety disorder, obsessive-compulsive disorder, and atypical depression.⁹

Symptoms of BDD first show up in the individual at an average age of sixteen years, four months, but the largest study of this disorder shows that it can afflict girls as young as nine and women up to twenty-three years of age. A typical sufferer is someone like the seventeen-year-old white girl I’ll call “Maggie.” For three months, Maggie refused to leave her house because, as she frequently told her family, she was ashamed of her “big nose,” “small breasts,” “flat hair,” and “bad skin.” An objective appraisal of Maggie’s looks, however, would conclude that Maggie’s perceived “deformities” are virtually invisible; most people would say that she’s actually quite attractive. Nevertheless, Maggie spends hours daily critically studying herself in a mirror and repeatedly asking siblings and parents for reassurances. Her once-active social life vanished; she started refusing dates and turned down invitations to parties and other social events. In desperation, she consulted a succession of cosmetic surgeons, but none would agree to perform a procedure without parental consent.¹⁰

When her parents realized that Maggie’s condition was serious, they convinced her to meet with a psychotherapist, a fortunate turn of events: The only effective course of treatment for BDD is psychiatric or psychological counseling, coupled with antianxiety medication. Even without therapy, many BDD sufferers gradually lose symptoms as they age, but the untreated often experience a succession of related disorders.¹¹

While people who suffer acute, disabling anxiety over their appearance number in the millions, they are nevertheless only a small fraction of the population. Millions more, however, while retaining

the abilities to function in their lives and careers, devote an inordinate slice of their waking day to worrying about how they look.

To learn more about this phenomenon, Barbara L. Fredrickson, director of the University of Michigan's Positive Emotions and Psychophysiology Laboratory, assembled 350 young men and women

Millions, while retaining the abilities to function in their lives and careers, devote an inordinate slice of their waking day to worrying about how they look.

for two experiments aimed at documenting the psychological costs of raising girls in a culture that “persistently objectifies the female body” and “socializes women to adopt a third-person perspective on their bodies.”¹²

One of Fredrickson's experiments revealed that what a woman wears, even when alone, can heighten her preoccupation with how her body looks—usually at the expense of her critical mental performance skills. And it's not just revealing or low-cut clothes, such as bathing suits or evening dresses, that have this consciousness-altering effect. “Any clothing or circumstances that makes a woman feel self-conscious about how she looks to others, even if she thinks she looks great, might reduce the mental energy she brings to demanding tasks, like solving advanced math problems,” explains Fredrickson. She adds that asking herself how she looks, or constantly checking her appearance in mirrors, adjusting a strap, or even tugging on a skirt, diverts mental resources, making the individual temporarily unavailable for more challenging or vital mental tasks.

Men, however, are not affected by their clothing. While women varied widely on their degree of preoccupation with their appearance, “as a group, women scored higher than men on tests of what the researchers call ‘self-objectification,’” as Fredrickson and her colleague Stephanie Noll found.

According to Fredrickson and another colleague, social psychologist Tomi-Ann Roberts, the tendency to view one's body from the outside in—that is, by valuing PA and sex appeal as more central to body identity than health, strength, energy level, coordination, or fitness—may have even more harmful effects beyond diminished mental performance, increased feelings of shame and anxiety, and development of eating disorders. Fredrickson and Roberts think

that preoccupation with appearance has far-reaching consequences and is probably linked to the high prevalence of depression and sexual dysfunction among American women.

Furthermore, research by Dr. Shanette M. Harris, a professor in the University of Rhode Island's clinical psychology program, suggests that body concerns and dissatisfaction with appearance begin during puberty and remain relatively stable throughout a woman's lifetime.¹³ This notion is supported by earlier research done at Cornell University, where researchers found that the cultural ideals represented by thin women are "clearly present" in sixth-grade girls, and that such early establishment of body dissatisfaction is linked to the escalating levels of anorexia nervosa and related eating disorders in adolescents.¹⁴

Where and how does a young woman learn to objectify herself?

Much has been written about the effect of the mass media on fostering attitudes. The billions of dollars spent annually to advertise products, services, and candidates for public office are testament to at least the strong belief that the images and messages on television, in periodicals, and on billboards are enormously influential. "The mass media force attention to certain issues. They build up public images of political figures. They are constantly presenting objects suggesting what individuals in the mass should think about, know about, have feelings about," wrote Kurt and Gladys Lang in their essay "The Mass Media and Voting."¹⁵

And if the adults in a family are thereby influenced to form opinions on the nature and importance of PA, could such attitudes influence their offspring during formative years?

To answer that question, a team of Canadian researchers led by Dr. Caroline Davis of York University's Department of Kinesiology and Health Sciences in Ontario decided to see if eating-disordered families are overly concerned with PA and social appearance. Interview and questionnaire data collected from 158 healthy young women were massaged and analyzed. In the end, the researchers concluded that family risk factors have a more potent influence on young women who are easily made anxious, perhaps because they are more sensitive to, or more likely to internalize, pressures and expectations to conform to family values.¹⁶

Ill health witnessed here offsets beauty benefits. But beauty pays prized dividends, and few people scrutinize transactions beneath the surface veneers. Be it expenditures of health or money, seekers of greater PA abound, investing mightily in pursuits to improve on nature's design. We next peek behind the financial veil and see some not-so-pretty prices.

CHAPTER 10

What Price for Good Looks?



The hidden costs of aesthetic enhancements

The rise of eating disorders and the increase in expressions of body dissatisfaction are not the only indicators of ways that the media's relentless emphasis on physical attractiveness has shaped American beauty values. America's growing obsession with beauty has transformed the cosmetic surgery industry. Only a few years ago a tiny cadre of elite surgeons performed a relatively small number of often secretive and expensive operations for the benefit of the horribly disfigured or to indulge the wealthy. Now tens of thousands of doctors with a variety of medical specialties dispense an astonishing panoply of beauty-enhancing procedures eagerly sought by middle-class Americans of every age.

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The most popular, by far, is the injection of Botox, a procedure involving a tiny amount of a purified and extremely dilute solution of the deadly botulism toxin. Injected into the face, it paralyzes muscles, smoothing wrinkles. Side effects may include a degree of loss in facial expression and unwanted facial muscle paralysis in sites near the targeted area and, less commonly, nausea, headache, fatigue, malaise, flu-like symptoms, and rashes.

By any measure, Botox is a hit. In 2004, more than 2.8 million Americans had injections, a 25 percent increase from the preceding year, according to American Society for Aesthetic Plastic Surgery (ASAPS) statistics. A Botox shot for wrinkles is the fastest-growing cosmetic procedure in the country, with women and men flocking to doctors, to spas, to walk-in stores in upscale malls, and even to so-called “Botox parties.”

Irena Medavoy advanced beyond such beauty seekers. The attractive forty-four-year-old wife of prominent motion picture executive Mike Medavoy received a series of Botox injections after her dermatologist suggested it might help her cope with migraine headaches. Medavoy told NBC reporter Maria Shriver that while meeting with Dr. Arnold “Dermatologist to the Stars” Klein, she discussed her migraine headaches with him.¹

“Oh, do you get headaches?” asked Dr. Klein.

“Yes, I get migraines,” replied Medavoy.

“Oh, well, you know what? We’re using Botox for migraines.”

“Really? Wow, I don’t . . . you know . . . I don’t know.”

“Oh, no side effects. It’s nothing. It’ll definitely help you; it’s great.”

The Food and Drug Administration has approved Botox for only three medical conditions, including cosmetic application only for the forehead “frown line” between the eyes. Many doctors, however, routinely test new drugs for what are termed “off-label” uses: treatments not yet approved by the FDA. Several off-label Botox uses seem to hold promise, including treatment of migraines.

Irena was well aware of the drug’s cosmetic utility and that Dr.

Klein, whose patient roster included Elizabeth Taylor, had been an early Botox booster, touting the treatment for both cosmetic and medical uses. In 2001, Klein took part in an NBC News demonstration of its many applications. Nor can anyone doubt that Irena Medavoy was then among Tinseltown's biggest Botox fans, paying up to \$1,000 per treatment to maintain her flawless face. "I don't know anybody who wasn't using it . . . every single friend," confided Medavoy to Shriver and a television audience in the millions. "Absolutely. We all have the exact same forehead. We used to walk around with the same kind of . . . no expression kind of thing."

Before this particular meeting with Dr. Klein, Medavoy's migraines were treated by a neurologist, Dr. Andrew Charles. "Did you think to call [Charles] and say, 'You know what, my dermatologist tells me [to use] Botox for migraines. What do you think?'" asked Shriver. "I didn't," replied Medavoy. "I trusted Klein. I've known him for twenty-five years."

Irena Medavoy accepts responsibility for not asking more questions about Botox. But she blames Dr. Klein for not disclosing that he was a paid consultant to Botox manufacturer Allergan, Inc., and for failing to tell her that injecting Botox for migraines was an off-label treatment. But then again, long before April 2002, when Botox was approved for wrinkles, she had signed Klein's consent form, allowing him to inject her for off-label uses and potentially shielding him from any legal consequences that might arise from these uses.

Medavoy told NBC News that she had experienced no adverse reaction to earlier Botox wrinkle treatments. That changed, she says, with her migraine treatments. According to a medical file that she shared with NBC News, Dr. Klein injected her in the neck, at the base of the skull, with eighty-six units, the largest Botox dose he'd ever given her. NBC spoke with several neurologists who confirmed that both the injection location and dosage were standard Botox migraine treatment.

Medavoy later said that she knew immediately that something was wrong. She nevertheless felt well enough the day following her injections to take her four-year-old and some of his friends to Disneyland. Three or four days later, however, she began to feel

strange. At first it was chills and fever, as though she was coming down with influenza. Another two or three days later the roof fell in. “I thought I was having a stroke. I got a headache like I’ve never had in my life.”

Her pain increased and wouldn’t respond to the usual migraine medication. So Medavoy called Dr. Klein, who, she claims, admitted that he might have given her too much Botox. The pain, which was *not* like that of her usual migraines, grew worse. “This was an incapacitating, unremitting headache centered more around her neck and shoulders, and didn’t respond to any of the medications we tried on her,” explained Dr. Charles, her neurologist. Medavoy wound up in the ER, complaining that beyond an excruciating headache, she had trouble breathing, was running a temperature of 102 degrees, and suffered other flulike symptoms. After her second ER trip and a round of doctors’ visits, Dr. Robert Huizinga, Medavoy’s internist for some five years, was perplexed: His healthy patient had suddenly become very ill.

Mrs. Medavoy sued Klein and Allergan for a number with so many zeroes it would give you, well, a migraine. When the case went to trial in October 2004, however, attorneys representing Klein and Allergan convinced nine of twelve Los Angeles jurors that while Botox might indeed have caused Medavoy’s problems, neither Dr. Klein nor Allergan could be held liable for Irena’s suffering.²

Irena Medavoy is not the only patient to regret choosing Botox. Or what she *thought* was Botox. Because a single dose of this drug

Irena Medavoy is not the only patient to regret choosing Botox. Or what she *thought* was Botox.

is so costly, hundreds of physicians have given in to the temptation of acquiring a substitute from perhaps dubious sources. In 2004, for example, at least 219 doctors purchased an unapproved Botox knockoff from a firm in Tucson, Arizona. Now a dozen physicians in three states face license suspension—and hundreds more are expecting visits by federal regulators—in an investigation into what FDA regulators and federal prosecutors say was the sale of fake Botox and its injection into unsuspecting patients.³

As reported in *USA Today*, Toxin Research International (TRI) of Tucson and its affiliates promoted their own version of botulinum

toxin as a cheaper alternative to Botox. Despite package labels that said this product was *not* for human use, patients in Florida, Nevada, and Oregon received injections; many were unaware that it was not Botox. Although no injuries were reported among *those* patients, a doctor involved in the distribution of the toxin was not so lucky. Dr. Bach McComb, a Florida osteopath, injected himself and three patients—including his girlfriend—with a solution carrying a far higher concentration of botulinum than found in real Botox. McComb and all three patients were afflicted with potentially fatal muscle paralysis. All four survived extended hospitalization but suffered serious, long-term complications.

TRI's Dr. Chad Livdahl and Dr. Zarah Karim, each thirty-four years old and married to each other, pleaded guilty to mail fraud and conspiracy and could be free in time to celebrate their silver wedding anniversary. McComb pleaded guilty to conspiring to defraud the federal government and to mislabeling drugs. Dr. Robert Baker, professor of ophthalmology and director of oculofacial plastic surgery at the University of Kentucky, also faces federal charges, including conspiracy, in connection with this scheme.⁴

“This deadly toxin . . . wrapped in the guise of medicine represents a grave threat,” said Marcos Daniel Jimenez, U.S. Attorney for the Southern District of Florida, who filed the charges. According to prosecutors, Livdahl and Karim marketed their product through brochures mailed to doctors nationwide and in this manner sold over 3,000 vials of the toxin. Their investment of \$30,000, including marketing expenses, brought them \$1.7 million. A vial of the unapproved toxin, enough for five doses, went for \$1,250. In contrast, Allergan's approved Botox comes in a single-dose vial and wholesales for around \$560. Each of the knockoff vials cost TRI less than \$10.⁵

Based on the latest data from the ASAPS, medical cosmetic procedures in the United States continue to skyrocket. Nearly 11.5 million nonsurgical and surgical procedures were performed in 2006—747 percent and 98 percent increases, respectively, since 1997—with Americans spending just over \$12 billion. Botox injections led the nonsurgical list with 3,181,592 procedures followed by hyaluronic acid chemical peel (1,593,554), laser hair removal

(1,475,296), micodermabrasion (993,071), and laser skin resurfacing (576,509). The top five surgical cosmetic procedures were liposuction (403,684 procedures), breast augmentation (383,886), eyelid surgery (209,999), abdominoplasty (172,457), and breast reduction (145,822). Women account for 92 percent of the 2006 totals, soaring 749 percent for nonsurgical procedures and 123 percent for surgical procedures since 1997. Men received nearly 1 million medical cosmetic procedures in 2006, escalating 722 percent for nonsurgical procedures and tapering off 2 percent for cosmetic surgical procedures since 1997.

Because these medical cosmetic procedures are now widely available and increasingly acceptable socially, they are sought by ever-growing numbers of people in pursuit of PA enhancement

Because these medical cosmetic procedures are now widely available and increasingly acceptable socially, they are sought by ever-growing numbers of people (whether they can afford the costs or not).

(whether they can afford the costs or not). That's *at least* based on ASAPS statistics as collected by surveying board-certified physicians and surgeons with specialties in plastic surgery, otolaryngology, and dermatology. ASAPS does not collect data from other surgeons or from licensed physicians not certified in cosmetic surgery.

Nor does its data necessarily include the growing number of off-label procedures performed by doctors whose PA-seeking patients

demand the latest procedures and bring forth the money to pay for them. Take New York's Dr. Steven Victor, a Madison Avenue cosmetic dermatologist, whose office is stocked with an array of the newest-fangled body-perfecting and youth-prolonging equipment. Victor is an advocate of offering the latest technology along with state-of-the-art pharmaceuticals to his patients, sometimes even when a particular procedure has not yet gained FDA approval. For example, Restylane, trade name for a natural sugar present in the skin called hyaluronic acid, was first used in France, England, and Canada. Like collagen, it's a wrinkle filler and lip enhancer. Although initially approved in the United States for use in ophthalmologic and orthopedic surgery, it was not approved by the FDA until late 2003 for cosmetic use specific to facial wrinkles. Restylane lasts

twice as long as collagen, but patients often suffer more pain and bruising, especially in their lips. Victor provided it on request to his most demanding patients long before specific FDA approval.

To Victor, Restylane was old news, already on the road to respectable obsolescence. Interviewed for *New York* magazine in 2003, he said, “By the time Restylane gets approved here, nobody will be using it in Europe anymore. People have been using it in the United States and in other countries for years. We’ve been hearing forever that it’s getting approved by the FDA any day.” At that time, even before Restylane was approved in late 2003, the doctor preferred to talk about a hot new wrinkle eliminator called Matridex, for which FDA approval is pending. “Matridex fills instantly and loses only between 30 percent and 50 percent of its correction,” he explained, adding that, by contrast, Restylane dissipates entirely in six to nine months, requiring follow-up treatment.⁶

Victor is far from the only doctor practicing and promoting procedures on the leading edges of the aesthetician’s art. According to *New York* magazine, many among Gotham’s elite cosmetic corps routinely use medicines for off-label treatments. And many see themselves more as part of an international medical community than as strictly American doctors since their patients often have the resources one way or another to travel anywhere for the PA enhancements they crave. So, instead of looking to the FDA, these licensed beauty dispensers follow studies and clinical and anecdotal evidence from European and South American practitioners. Often they voice open resentment of the FDA’s measured approval process. Knowing that they are in a global competitive industry driven by high consumer demand, many are willing to venture into gray areas like off-label procedures to attract the sort of well-heeled patients that can turn an ordinary medical practice into a river of cash.

Ethically, such doctors justify use of unapproved drugs under a doctrine called “standard of care,” which makes the case that when a considerable number of physicians practice a particular treatment without obviously endangering patients, it tends to legitimize the procedure. In other words, going out on an ethical limb to meet patients’ desires for enhanced PA is justified when “everybody does it.”

Doctors pursue two legal routes to using a drug lacking FDA

approval: the “off-label” approach (discussed previously), and the use of drugs whose manufacturer has never even sought FDA approval for cosmetic applications.

Other doctors disagree, often heatedly, over the ethics and safety of using unapproved products. To them, FDA regulations are virtually Holy Writ; they think that doctors who ignore government regulations by using unapproved treatments should be subject to losing their medical licenses. “Either we respect the laws or we don’t,” asserts Dr. Thomas Romo III, a Lenox Hill Hospital official and an influential member of several New York medical societies. “When the FDA says something is not approved at all, it’s not ‘sort of’ against the law if you use it, it *is* against the law,” he says. “If it was really necessary for patient survival, like a cancer-curing medicine, maybe one could wink at it, but . . . to fill in a crease? What makes these doctors feel they are above the law?”⁷

Dr. Stephen Bosniak is an ophthalmic plastic surgeon at New York Eye and Ear Infirmary who has used Restylane on patients for years. “Patient safety is paramount,” he says, explaining that he used Restylane in animal studies and then at a Brazilian clinic before injecting it into his New York patients. (Apparently, endangering Brazilians is an acceptable risk as long as they’re in Brazil.) Yet Bosniak is cautious about off-label usage after treating people who had used certain European-made wrinkle fillers that produced terrible lumps and ugly sores. By way of illustration, he said that when patients ask him for ArteFill, a wrinkle filler that suspends acrylic beads in collagen, he refuses, because the beads often harden under the skin. When patients then ask doctors to repair newly lumpy tissue, cortisone injections sometimes help, but often they don’t. “I don’t think the FDA will ever approve [ArteFill],” he adds.⁸ Despite his handicapping odds, the FDA approved ArteFill in 2006.

Other patients travel to Canada or Europe for treatment—and later regret it. “There have been problems with semipermanent fillers in Canada and Europe,” explained Dr. Neil Sadick, a dermatologist. Some people develop persistent nodules under their skin. “They become hard, visible, and inflamed, and many of these reactions can occur years later,” continued Sadick, who suggests that

people wait at least a few years before using any new product that offers permanent or semipermanent results.⁹

In fact, some doctors believe that even FDA approval doesn't guarantee that a product is safe to use: Over the last few years, many FDA-approved drugs, including painkillers and the arthritis drugs Vioxx and Celebrex, have been yanked from pharmacies or relabeled after patients suffered unanticipated side effects. Another example of poor FDA monitoring: Johnson & Johnson's Duragesic, a prescription patch that delivers fentanyl, a narcotic many times more powerful than morphine. In 2004, pharmacists filled more than 4 million Duragesic prescriptions. Like all opioids—drugs derived from opium—fentanyl controls pain but also reduces respiratory function, and too much fentanyl can cause people to stop breathing entirely. That happens more than occasionally: Between 1999 and 2005, the Los Angeles County coroner's office investigated more than 230 deaths involving fentanyl and classified 127 of these as "accidental," suggesting that victims inadvertently overdosed themselves. Reports from around the country suggest there may be thousands of such cases nationwide. Yet the FDA was slow to investigate hundreds of suspicious deaths associated with fentanyl, or to alert physicians, pharmacists, or patients.¹⁰

Some doctors believe that even FDA approval doesn't guarantee that a product is safe to use.

And then there was the widely prescribed fen-phen, a combination of fenfluramine and phentermine. Fen-phen was celebrated, for a time, for its efficacy in promoting weight loss—until 1997, when the celebrated Mayo Clinic reported that twenty-four patients developed heart valve disease after taking it. Dozens of heart-related deaths were reported before the FDA pulled fen-phen from the market. The FDA was criticized for failing to do adequate studies before granting approval.

More recently there's Radiance, FDA-approved for such treatments as thickening bladder walls to deal with incontinence. Made from microscopic calcium particles found in bone and teeth and suspended in a gel, many cosmetic dermatologists inject it, off label, to fill wrinkles or bolster lips. But months or years later some

patients develop bonelike deposits in or near the injection location. Just because something is green-lighted by the FDA, opined Dr. Thomas Loeb, a cosmetic surgeon, “doesn’t mean that I approve of it. Look at Radiance. People get hard knots in the lip from it.”¹¹

So what does FDA approval, or its absence, actually guarantee? The agency is vested with the responsibility and authority to ensure that food and drugs offered for sale in America are safe to use. But when the FDA, for example, refuses to allow unrestricted sale of a drug, does that indicate that it is unsafe?

Not at all. Recently, charges of political interference with the FDA approval process were raised by the Government Accountability Office, a nonpartisan congressional watchdog. GAO investigators found that senior officials in the Food and Drug Administration withheld approval of a morning-after birth control pill for over-the-counter sale, perhaps because of pressure from religious groups. The GAO report described “an appalling level of manipulation and suppression of the science,” said Representative Henry A. Waxman. The FDA’s refusal to approve a pill marketed commercially as “Plan B” followed scientific reviews by three separate FDA offices and two panels of outside advisers. All recommended that Plan B be approved for sale without a prescription. Instead, FDA top management blocked the decision from going forward.¹²

How could this happen? Perhaps because the blocking bureaucrats, political appointees serving at the pleasure of the president of the United States, felt more obligation to political backers than to the public at large. Or because the unrestricted sale of any birth control drug offended their personal morality. Regardless of the reason, if pressures on FDA bureaucrats can get even one of them to ignore scientific studies and block a drug from entering the nonprescription market, where does it stop? Pharmaceutical manufacturers, like every regulated industry, lavish campaign contributions on Washington politicians of every stripe. Could drug makers encourage an FDA decision maker to ignore science and fast-track their product? At least when it comes to trying preparations for purely cosmetic purposes, the wise consumer would do well to recall that pioneers, to paraphrase Hamlet, often suffer the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune.

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While America's enthusiasm for nonsurgical cosmetic procedures soars to new heights, all of cosmetic surgery follows in lock-step. According to ASAPS statistics, in 2006, the latest year for which full data are available, Americans spent more than \$12 billion on more than 11 million medical cosmetic procedures. As detailed a few pages back, all the liposuctions, breast augmentations, eyelid surgeries, facelifts, and so forth add up to a 98 percent increase in surgical cosmetic procedures and a 747 percent increase in nonsurgical cosmetic procedures between 1997 and 2006.

There is little stigma attached to improving one's looks with a doctor's assistance these days, and now that cosmetic surgery has become more of a spending priority, small, specialized clinics have sprung up around the country. Some of these cosmetic surgery centers attract a steady stream of patients by advertising on cable television; many even offer financing. And the great majority of patients who avail themselves of such services are pleased with the results.

But many who have blithely plunked down several thousand bucks for a tummy tuck, boob job, or facelift rue the day they went under the knife. Like the twenty-three South Floridians who sought enhanced PA at the Florida Center for Cosmetic Surgery in Fort Lauderdale. Melanie, a forty-one-year-old woman who declined to give her last name, said she was so desperate for bigger breasts that she scrimped for years, finally borrowing the balance of the \$4,000 tab by putting up her car as security for a loan.¹³

Melanie doesn't love her new breasts. One is over a full cup size larger than the other. Her nipples are misshapen. As reported in the *Boca Raton News*, a year after her operation, her left breast was afflicted with sharp, chronic pains. "It actually feels like someone is stabbing me," she complained. "I can only sleep one or two hours a night because the pain . . . wakes me up."

Melanie said she experienced mild discomfort for weeks immediately following her surgery. During stitch removal, however, a nurse allegedly stabbed her with scissors. Her left breast became unbearably painful. "They told me they fixed the problem by firing the nurse, but they haven't fixed *my* problem. My problem is that my breast is killing me," she said.

So Melanie, along with twenty-two other patients, asked the clinic to compensate her for pain and suffering, no less than the damage to her figure. Soon thereafter, the Florida Board of Medicine disciplined two of the center's four surgeons for misconduct, according to state records. Oddly, neither surgeon carried medical malpractice insurance, making it difficult to recover damages from their respective medical corporations. When patients tried to collect from the center, its lawyers asserted that the facility exercised no supervision or control over medical services provided by its physicians.

Melanie turned to another doctor at the center for reconstructive surgery. She was injected with steroids to mitigate pain. It seemed to make no difference, so she found a lawyer and sued the Florida Center for Cosmetic Surgery.

While a center spokesperson claimed that over 80 percent of the cosmetic procedures it performs result from patient referrals, the center and its doctors are nevertheless well acquainted with malpractice lawsuits: Since 2000, they have settled with at least eighteen patients; several more cases are pending. Among the latter is Mona Alley, a diabetic, who lost both legs to infection when her intestine was punctured during a tummy tuck at the center. "I just couldn't lose my tummy," she told a local reporter. "I heard a cosmetic surgery ad on TV that liposuction was good for diabetics," said Alley. "I went to the center and the doctor told me it was fantastic and that there would be almost no downtime."¹⁴

The day after her tummy tuck, however, Alley was so sick she couldn't move. "The pain was unbearable," she said. "But when I went back for follow-up, [the doctor] patted me on the arm and said I'd be fine." After two weeks of complaining to this surgeon, Alley said, he finally listened to her chest through a stethoscope—and immediately referred her to her primary care physician. Tests revealed pockets of air in Alley's abdomen, water in her lungs, and blood clots in her legs. "The liposuction had pierced . . . the abdominal wall," said Alley's lawyer. "The doctor cut her intestine and it was leaking feces into her abdomen."

Alley was required to use a colostomy bag for nearly a year. Both her buttocks required reconstruction. Formerly a champion

bowler and always very active, Alley now struggles to perform everyday tasks. “I’m managing, but it was real hard in the beginning,” she told the reporter. “If I knew then what I know now, I would never have considered this [procedure] with [the Florida Center],” said Alley. “I would have gone with a good doctor at a reputable hospital. In the center they don’t want to do aftercare.”

There are other cautionary tales told by former patients of this clinic.¹⁵ One is Adrianna Arroyo of Miami, who nearly died after submitting to a tummy tuck, breast implants, and liposuction on the same day in 1999. For a week afterward she complained of nausea, vomiting, and weakness but received no medical attention until she was taken to Baptist Hospital. There she almost died of kidney failure.

Katherine Kennedy, a North Miami Beach flight attendant, also saw the center’s television ads but was persuaded when a friend recommended the center. She chose a “two-for-one special,” where she paid \$5,000 for breast implants and thigh liposuction. She was left with permanent nerve damage that caused such severe pain she could get temporary relief only from a series of spinal epidurals. Even so, some experts say she was lucky to survive; undergoing two such procedures the same day often leads to deadly complications. Kennedy’s case was only one among many: Between 1997 and 2004, at least thirty-six people died in Florida as a result of complications from cosmetic surgery. Two of the dead were patients of the Florida Center for Cosmetic Surgery in Fort Lauderdale: James K. McCormick, a bartender, died on his fifty-first birthday, soon after receiving a chin implant and facelift. And Jacqueline Roberts, an employee of a local newspaper, died three days after her tummy tuck and breast reduction at the center.

On February 11, 2004, the Florida Board of Medicine called for a ninety-day statewide ban on performing outpatient liposuction and tummy tucks within the same fourteen-day period. They also demanded the surgical logs of all Florida doctors who performed these and other cosmetic procedures on outpatients between June 1, 2002, and January 31, 2004.

Bad luck, you say. These unfortunate people, and the hundreds of others who have suffered death or disfigurement from a cosmetic

procedure, should have had the sense to insist on undergoing their operation in a real hospital, not a clinic or a doctor's office. In fact, about 20 of every 100,000 patients who underwent liposuction in the United States between 1994 and 1998 died—a higher death rate than for people in motor vehicle accidents. Even so, that's only one-eighth the rate of deaths from liposuction in the 1970s.¹⁶

So things are getting better, right?

Maybe. But consider the disturbing case of novelist Olivia Goldsmith, at fifty-five years of age the best-selling novelist and author of *The First Wives Club*, who on January 7, 2004, checked into the pricey and highly regarded Manhattan Eye, Ear, and Throat Hospital in New York. Goldsmith was scheduled for what many cosmetic surgeons would describe as minor surgery—a “chin tuck” to remove loose skin beneath her chin.¹⁷

This procedure was not supposed to be a big deal for the author, who had gone under an aesthetic surgeon's knife on several previous occasions. More to the point, the characters in Goldsmith's pop-feminist novels toss off plastic surgery and Botox injections the way Ian Fleming's James Bond leaves a trail of bleeding bodies and broken hearts in his wake. If there was anyone who should have understood the risks—and perhaps the futility—of burnishing one's outside when one feels ugly inside, it was Olivia Goldsmith.

Yet here she was again with her usual doctor, Norman Pastorek, a well-regarded otolaryngologist (ear, nose, and throat specialist) with what *New York* magazine described as a devoted following. For reasons still not clear, Goldsmith elected general anesthesia instead of less risky and more usual local anesthesia. She knew that while Manhattan Eye, Ear, and Throat is considered one of New York City's best places to get procedures like a chin tuck, like many hospitals purveying a menu of elective surgery, specially trained nurses are allowed to administer anesthesia under an anesthesiologist's supervision. The anesthesiologist, however, is often responsible for supervising multiple operations simultaneously.

Even before Goldsmith's surgeon lifted his scalpel, she had problems. Her entire body began to writhe and buck. As these convulsive spasms abated, she slipped into a coma. Despite many attempts to revive her, Olivia Goldsmith never regained consciousness

and died eight days later, on January 15, at nearby Lenox Hill Hospital.

The New York City Medical Examiner concluded that the novelist's death was linked to anesthesia; the operating room staff failed to monitor her respiration and carbon dioxide levels and draped her in such a way that they could not observe her respiratory movements. The official report also said that despite signs of respiratory problems and the fact she was already heavily sedated, Goldsmith was given fentanyl, the powerful pain reliever that acts on the central nervous system but can also interfere with respiration.

Even more distressing to those considering plastic surgery—or whose livelihood is earned in this field—was that the day after the unfortunate Goldsmith expired, a second patient at Manhattan Eye, Ear, and Throat, fifty-six-year-old Susan Malitz of Connecticut also died of complications from anesthesia. The New York State Department of Health attributed Malitz's death to an excessive dose of lidocaine—four times the maximum safe dose for this anesthetic—perhaps complicated by the fact it was injected into her trachea instead of into neck tissue.¹⁸

New York health department authorities cited the hospital for “serious breakdowns in patient care in its anesthesia and plastic surgery departments” and levied fines of \$20,000, or the maximum penalty of \$2,000 per violation for each of ten deficiencies. These violations included the staff's failure to complete a thorough preoperative workup for Goldsmith, their lack of adequate monitoring of both patients' respiration and vital signs during surgery, and their unexplained and significant delay in responding

Americans who can't afford the prices sometimes seek bargains abroad.

appropriately to each emergency.

Americans who can't afford the prices at hospitals like Manhattan Eye, Ear, and Throat sometimes seek bargains abroad, especially in Spain, which has the largest number of plastic surgeons per capita in Europe. Spanish surgeons perform 350,000 procedures a year, trailing only Brazil and the United States. Spanish cosmetic surgery clinics attract not only budget-minded Europeans, but also Arab potentates and developing world dignitaries. People like Stella Obasanjo, fifty-nine, wife of Nigeria's president, General

Olusegun Obasanjo, who in October 2005 checked into the ultra-chic Molding Clinic, in the glitzy Costa del Sol resort city of Marbella, for a tummy tuck. Mrs. Obasanjo rose to international prominence in the mid-1990s when, at great personal risk, she successfully campaigned for the release of her husband after he was jailed for allegedly plotting a coup against the repressive Abacha military junta. Mrs. Obasanjo later received several awards for her work on behalf of women's rights.¹⁹

None of that was of any help when, during surgery, she lapsed into a coma and was rushed from the plastic surgery wing to the ER, where efforts to revive her failed. Her family is said to be considering legal action for medical malpractice.

Far luckier than Mrs. Obasanjo were the patients of fifty-eight-year-old Gregorio Nosovsky. Despite his habit of wearing a white lab coat with "Dr. Nosovsky" embroidered on its breast and the business cards he passed out identifying him as an MD, Nosovsky never finished medical school. That didn't stop him from appearing on TV talk shows as a medical expert or from performing plastic surgery on dozens of women, often with the help of his brother, Isaac, who actually did have a medical license. License or no, Gregorio was a busy fellow. He performed breast enlargements, tummy tucks, nose jobs, facelifts, and liposuction. He made a lot of money.²⁰

Gregorio and Isaac Nosovsky saw patients at the Advanced Center for Cosmetic Surgery in an affluent suburb of Fort Lauderdale. Gregorio was arrested in April 2002 after Marta Gonzalez told authorities that she had suffered complications from breast surgery performed by Gregorio. Later, she said, Isaac performed corrective surgery, but that only made things worse. As reported by the *Sz. Petersburg Times*, once Gonzalez's complaint became public, thirty-five more women came forward with similar stories about disfigurement under Gregorio Nosovsky's scalpel. "These women were victimized," announced Broward County sheriff's spokeswoman Liz Calzadilla-Fiallo. "We by no means think that thirty-six is the final count."

Unlicensed physicians are hardly a new American phenomenon, but the growing interest in cosmetic procedures has opened new

vistas for the ethically challenged who believe that even a fake doctor can simply bury his mistakes. One such mistake was made on Maria Cruz, a thirty-five-year-old Filipino immigrant who made a six-figure salary at a large New York bank. Maria, described as a chaste and pious woman, sought breast implants from a man calling himself Dr. Dean Faiello. Ten months later, police found Cruz's body folded into a suitcase and embedded in cement outside Faiello's former New Jersey home. Between the time Cruz was last seen alive and her body was recovered, Faiello was arrested for practicing medicine without a license and for illegally possessing medical drugs. He pleaded guilty, was released on bail pending a sentencing hearing, then fled to Costa Rica to evade prison.²¹

Most victims of sloppy surgery find a lawyer; a few, like Theresa Mary Ramirez, seek revenge. She is now serving life in prison for the 1997 murder of Dr. Michael Tavis, whom she claimed gave her leaking breast implants. In Bellevue, Washington, Beryl Challis removed her bandages after a facelift and was so unnerved by the face in the mirror that after killing her surgeon, Dr. Selwyn Cohen, she went home and took her own life.²²

No discussion of the hazards of aesthetic procedures would be complete without mentioning that a few people find the whole notion of undergoing cosmetic surgery irresistible. And so they spend enormous sums on an endless series of operations, often winding up looking like Frankenstein's monster, but sure that just one or two more surgeries will fix everything.

The world's best-known plastic surgery subject is undoubtedly pop singer Michael Jackson, who has undergone surgery no less than a dozen times—and probably many more. This decades-long metamorphosis transformed him from a dark-skinned, broad-nosed, Afro-haired adolescent into a pasty, slender-nosed, long-haired, dimpled, and androgynous Caucasian whose chiseled features can only be described as grotesque. If Jackson's goal was a singular appearance, he has long since realized it; he now looks so strange that many viewing genuine photographs of him want to believe that the images, and not the man, have been doctored. Dermatologists who have analyzed such pictures speculate that Jackson has had Botox injections in his forehead and plastic surgery on his nose, eyes, and

chin. He has probably been injected with a hydroquinone compound (unlawful in the United States) to lighten his skin and has tattooed eyebrows and eyeliner. Widespread rumors have it that repeated surgeries have exacted such a toll that he now sports a prosthetic nose.

Oddly, the world's second-most-famous plastic surgery patient is also both a singer and a Jackson. Cindy Jackson, no relation to the King of Pop, grew up in a small, somewhat isolated Ohio farming community, the daughter of a farmer-turned-inventor. By her account, it was a confined and confining existence that fueled her desire to escape. When she was six, she got a Barbie doll. "In my imagination I dreamed of a happy and glamorous life for my doll. Through Barbie, I could glimpse an alternative destiny," wrote Jackson in her autobiography, *Living Doll*.²³

Drawn to the Beatles and the so-called music and fashion "British Invasion" of the early sixties, Jackson yearned for London, where everything she wanted to be part of was happening. In her teens, she took up art and photography, but as her awareness of the visual grew, Jackson realized that she could not compete with prettier prom queens and cheerleaders who attracted football players and other campus heroes. After high school she attended art college, while toiling eighteen months in a factory and working a second job in a gas station to save money. In April 1977, Cindy Jackson left for England with two suitcases and \$600.

After a few years in London's bohemian scene, Jackson found herself singing backup vocals for a punk band, then writing songs and fronting her own group; for almost a decade she was a fixture on the British rock circuit. In 1988, she came into an inheritance that enabled her to do something about her PA, which she still felt was lacking. She began having cosmetic surgeries, one after another. After nine procedures she looked remarkably like the Barbie doll that invited her childhood dreams. She has written two books, including a memoir about cosmetically improving her PA, and has appeared on a succession of television shows to talk about her surgical transformation, which, she writes, after twenty-eight operations, is nearly complete.

Another of America's most celebrated plastic-surgery subjects is

New York socialite Jocelyn Wildenstein, former wife of a billionaire art dealer. After several surgeries, Jocelyn's face bears a striking resemblance to that of a hairless feline; she is known as the Cat Lady.²⁴

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Many Americans clearly are addicted to plastic surgery. Thousands risk their lives and spend millions of dollars in pursuit of artificial perfection; they are sometimes called nip-and-tuck addicts. Many live with grotesque disfigurements yet can hardly wait for their next procedure.

Consider the case of a thirty-four-year-old porn actress who works under the name "Jen X." After multiple Botox injections, a chin implant, and breast augmentation, she began to fear that she was becoming addicted to plastic surgery. "I already have an addictive personality," she told freelance reporter Dan Kapelovitz for an article for *Hustler* magazine. "I'm already in twelve steps. I'm just shifting my addiction from alcohol and drugs to plastic surgery, [which] is way more expensive than alcohol."

Many Americans clearly are addicted to plastic surgery. Thousands risk their lives and spend millions of dollars in pursuit of artificial perfection.

When Jen X decided that she needed rhinoplasty, she tried to raise the money by agreeing to a porn video group-sex scene, a gig that paid \$1,700. The work was so punishing, however, that she wound up with a kidney infection and thousands of dollars in medical bills. She canceled her nose job but still pays monthly for special silicone injections for her lips, an illegal procedure so dangerous that physicians who perform it are considered outlaws. Yet, even knowing the risks, she is driven by the need to compete. "The more surgery everyone else gets, the more I have to get to keep up," she said.

"I do not know any girl who has ever enhanced herself only one time," says Rhiannon, a professional dominatrix who has all but quartered America in her quest for ever-bigger boobs. Rhiannon crams her breasts, which weigh about ten pounds each, into a size 48 triple-M bra. She began her bust-enhancement odyssey in 1991 and has had thirty surgeries on her right breast alone. "I went in for a boob job like some people go to get their teeth cleaned," she told the reporter for *Hustler*.²⁵ "There's something about my personality

that big is never big enough. If I'm going to do it, I'm going all the way," she said, adding that she wants still-larger implants. "You can exercise until you're blue in the face, but your boobies aren't going to grow from that."

The kinky world of transsexuals is full of cosmetic surgery stars, but few have been more forthcoming about their bodywork than Amanda Lepore. Her medical metamorphosis attracted the attention of New York fashion photographer David LaChapelle, who made her an icon of the art world by putting her photo on the face of a watch. Beyond her conversion from male to female, followed by such relatively conventional procedures as liposuction, Botox, and cheek lifts and implants, Lepore had her bottom ribs filed down by a doctor in Mexico, an operation that no ethical American doctor will attempt. "What girl doesn't want a tinier waist?" she asks.

(The hoary assertion that such operations were common among wasp-waisted women of Victorian England is an urban legend; in the absence of sterile conditions and with only the most primitive anesthesia and surgical implements, such a procedure would have been suicidal.)

Not every plastic surgery addict is a performer. Case in point: fifty-something Terry Prone, novelist and public relations executive. Prone described her many trips to the surgeon in *Mirror, Mirror: Confessions of a Plastic Surgery Addict*. She has sampled almost everything in the aesthetic delicatessen: Botox injections, liposuction, tummy tuck, facelift, browlift, cheek implants, arm-lift surgery, laser resurfacing of her skin, LASIK eye surgery, and dental implants. Her eyebrows, eyelids, and lips are permanently tattooed. She had spider veins removed with lasers and even had her hammertoes flattened. "I'm not suggesting that plastic surgery addiction is as out-of-control as alcohol, cigarettes, or heroin," Prone explained. "I'm saying, there's a hell of a high involved. Not a chemical high. A continuous, low-level high."²⁶

Of course, not everyone who suffers through the pain and expense of repetitive surgeries is looking for that low-level high. Some are just trying to return their appearance to some semblance of normal. Like Beverly Hills realtor Elaine Young, whose client list, over the years, has included Elvis Presley, Jayne Mansfield, Brad Pitt,

M. C. Hammer, and O. J. Simpson. In 1979, she saw what a silicone injection had done for the face of a close friend and decided that she wanted some. She went to her friend's doctor the next day. "He said, 'I'll make you beautiful,' and that's all I had to hear," said Young. "I didn't check him out. I didn't know anything about him, and I got the injections."²⁷

At first, Young was very pleased. But within a year the silicone had migrated and was interfering with facial nerves. Her left cheek expanded until she found it impossible to close her eye. Then she learned that her cheek was gangrenous; if the silicone wasn't removed, the infection would kill her. The removal operation left the side of her face paralyzed for two years. Young blames the injection and subsequent surgery for ruining half of her six marriages and drastically curtailing her career. "I really looked like a monster for years. I would show a house with fifty stitches in my face," she said. Young goes for corrective surgery every six months to remove bits of the silicone.

The doctor who injected Young's face eventually committed suicide. "He hurt a lot of people," said Young, "and unfortunately, yours truly sent a lot of people to him, because he made me look really pretty in the beginning. It's typical insecurity that leads women to [cosmetic surgery]. I don't care what they say; most of the women who do it are either aging, and they want to look younger, or they're very insecure."

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Many, if not all, people addicted to plastic surgery suffer body dysmorphism or body dysmorphic disorder (BDD). They often come to dermatologists and cosmetic surgeons in search of a way to deal with what turns out to be an imaginary or insignificant defect in their appearance, typically a preoccupation with the skin, hair, or nose. Often they spend an inordinate amount of time and energy picking at their skin or checking themselves in a mirror. Others wear a hat or heavy makeup to camouflage an imagined facial defect. There may be as many as 3 million Americans with this disorder, and among them are tens of thousands of people with the resources to pay for repetitive cosmetic surgeries.²⁸

Because BDD is an underrecognized disorder, many plastic surgeons fail to appreciate that some who seek one procedure after another may need a psychiatric referral instead. “There are very well balanced people who have numerous surgeries,” opined Dr. Barry Weintraub, a spokesman for the American Society of Plastic Surgeons. “They’ll do one, and some months or years go by, and they’ll do another and then a third, and so on. Then there’s another group of people, and these characters, no matter what you do, are not happy.”²⁹

Such nip-and-tuck addicts are frequently seen by Dr. Z. Paul Lorenc, a New York cosmetic surgeon whose practice has attracted such notables as Katharine Hepburn (after her encounter with skin cancer) and Fortune 100 CEOs. But mostly his patients are what he calls the Park Avenue Posse—the ultrarich who live in opulent homes near his Upper East Side offices. In his book, *A Little Work: Behind the Doors of a Park Avenue Plastic Surgeon*, Lorenc describes the realities of dealing with a society increasingly obsessed with physical perfection. He finds, for example, that patients may lie about their medical history. “People often hide that they smoke, which affects your face,” explains Lorenc. “Others lie about medications they are taking. . . . One male patient was taking steroids but wouldn’t tell me. He wanted a facelift and nothing would stop him. I’ve never seen a patient’s face bleed so much in my life. Some people will even tell me that they haven’t had plastic surgery before, when it’s obvious they have.”³⁰

In such cases, says Lorenc, “The job of the plastic surgeon is to put on the brakes. Many of these people have body dysmorphic disorder. They’re obsessed. I’ll never forget one young man who came to me for a scar on his face. He insisted that he had this awful acne scar. I looked through my [magnifying glass] but found nothing there. The worst thing for me to do would be to operate. Because afterward he would have had a real scar.”

The wide availability of plastic surgery has distorted what is considered attractive.

Lorenc suspects that the wide availability of plastic surgery has distorted what is considered attractive. “I’m totally against cookie-cutter procedures,” he says. “But much of this is media-driven. For

instance, the show on MTV, *I Want a Famous Face*, where someone tries to look like Britney Spears—that’s insane.”

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In their never-ending quest to expand the makeover marketplace, some cosmetic surgeons have ventured into previously unmentionable territory. In 1994, a Toronto physician named Robert H. Stubbs became briefly famous after the news media reported that he had developed a new surgical technique to lengthen a penis, a procedure he said was based on techniques he learned from a physician named Dr. Long. (*I kid you not.*) The publicity brought Stubbs inquiries from legions of men, from every corner of North America, looking for heavier equipment to drive. As more plastic surgeons and urologists learned Stubbs’s technique, advertisements for this procedure—along with those for bogus cures—became almost commonplace. Is there anyone, in this era of the World Wide Web, who has never deleted e-mail spam offering him a thicker, longer penis?

In reality, however, penis-lengthening surgery is no trivial undertaking. American Urological Association literature says procedures involving the cutting of the suspensory ligament of the penis—the usual lengthening method—has “not been shown to be safe or effective.” The operation also requires extensive follow-up. According to Stubbs, the individual must commit to a series of exercises involving weights suspended from his organ. After all that, he cautions, results are rarely spectacular. Nevertheless, after treating many men, Stubbs was approached by a series of women who asked him to use his scalpel and surgical skills to enhance their genitalia as well. According to an MSNBC report, Stubbs now sees far more females seeking to enhance their genitals. His specialty: the “Toronto trim,” a dual procedure that includes surgical reduction of the inner labia along with a slight “unhooding” of the clitoris to enable greater stimulation during sex.³¹

Thousands of women are now starting to focus their PA perfection-obsession on elective surgeries that promise both a better sex life and more aesthetically pleasing private parts.

But Stubbs operates in Toronto, hardly a center of PA hedonism. North America’s greatest PA mecca lies thousands of miles

away, in Southern California, home of the latest trend in cosmetic surgery, “designer vaginas.” Thousands of women who have been nipped, tucked, implanted, and suctioned on nearly every other part of their bodies are now starting to focus their PA perfection-obsession on elective surgeries that promise both a better sex life and more aesthetically pleasing private parts.

Laser vaginal rejuvenation (LVR) is a term coined by Dr. David Matlock, a Los Angeles OB/GYN and plastic surgeon who has performed the procedure since 1995. Since then, he and his surgical techniques have been extensively profiled in the national media. His procedures fall between traditional OB/GYN surgery and cosmetic approaches.³²

LVR is based on “anterior and posterior repair,” a well-established procedure designed to treat incontinence by repairing weakened vaginal walls. This condition is sometimes induced by childbirth and leads to loss of bladder control (“stress incontinence”) when laughing, coughing, or sneezing. It’s caused by weakened muscle tissues between the vagina and bladder (cystocele) or when the wall between the rectum and the vagina is weakened (rectocele). Anterior (bladder) and posterior (rectum) repair has been used to alleviate this syndrome for decades. Traditionally, such surgical repairs may—or may not—yield a vagina that feels “tighter.”

Matlock modified this surgery to focus on tightening the vagina, swapping his traditional scalpel for a laser, which he said reduces blood loss and promotes faster healing. Then he repackaged and marketed the surgery as a cure for mothers who no longer enjoy sex.

Although there is scientific agreement that the clitoris is the woman’s primary source of pleasure, doctors who perform LVR often claim that it will improve sex for both man and woman. Matlock hands out literature that states that “as a sexual biological organism, women are superior to men,” and claims LVR results in increased friction that increases a woman’s sexual pleasure.

One of many American physicians who learned Matlock’s technique is Dr. Joe Berenholz, who after twenty years as an OB/GYN opened a small cosmetic surgery clinic grandly styled “The Laser

Vaginal Institute of Michigan” in Southfield, an upscale Detroit suburb. He’s doing land-office business.

Berenholz made the transition from conventional medicine, he said, in part because so many of his patients complained about diminished sexual enjoyment after childbirth. He was trained “to reassure a woman, to let her know this [condition] is normal, and to simply go home and live with it.”

But that was before many women would pay thousands of dollars to have their genitals sculpted. Berenholz now divides his time between area hospitals, his private OB/GYN practice, and his clinic, where two or three days a week he performs two or three surgeries for fees ranging from \$6,500 to \$8,500. He also offers a menu of “Designer Laser Vaginoplasty (DLV)” procedures. They include labioplasty (surgery on the labia), hymenoplasty (surgically repairing or replacing the hymen, to give the illusion of virginity), augmentation labioplasty (fat is removed from another part of the patient and transferred to the labia majora for an “aesthetically enhanced and youthful” look), and vulvar lipoplasty (removing unwanted fat from the mons pubis or labia majora, which can “alleviate unsightly fatty bulges of this area and produce an aesthetically pleasing contour”). As with any surgery, Berenholz confirmed that the major risks are infection and bleeding. Prices range from \$3,800 to \$6,000 per procedure.

According to Dr. V. Leroy Young, chair of the American Society of Plastic Surgeons (ASPS) Committee for Emerging Trends, such procedures are becoming very popular. He has noted that plastic surgeons have performed surgery on the labia for many years, but most use a scalpel. The laser, in his opinion, is “a gimmick.” He also thinks that patients seeking LVR will be better off to let an OB/GYN perform this type of surgery.

“Labial reduction is reasonably common among plastic surgeries,” Young told one newspaper, adding that current interest seems to be fueled by America’s widening acceptance of pornography, and by the lack of understanding of what is normal versus what represents a perceived ideal. “The thing that surprises me,” he said, “is how little understanding there is of what normal is.”³³

“There’s remarkably amazing patient interest in this,” Young

told Mireya Navarro, a reporter for the *New York Times*, adding that ASPS, the largest organization of plastic surgeons, does not keep statistics to track doctors whose specialty is “gynecologic cosmetic care” or “vaginal rejuvenation.”³⁴

Young believes that unless a woman has rectum or bladder prolapse, procedures like LVR are “meddlesome surgery” that pose “the risk that you can end up with loss of sensation or a painful scar.” If a patient has a genuine medical problem, “then, sure, there’s nothing wrong with the procedures, but they ought to be performed for a legitimate reason.”³⁵

Outside the bubble of cosmetic surgery practitioners, however, the whole idea of designer genitalia has provoked enormous controversy. Even while many doctors performing these surgeries claim that they are empowering women, others assert that their patients are actually submitting to the sexist notion that desirable women must have a youthfully tight vagina that conforms to a standard look found mostly in porn pictures. And indeed, Dr. Berenholz’s website at one point stated that many prospective labioplasty patients arrive with a copy of *Playboy* magazine to show him a centerfold model whose equipment illustrates what they hope their own genitalia will look like.

“Like there’s a right way for a woman’s private parts to look?” bristles Ophira Edut, editor of *Body Outlaws*, an anthology about women’s body image. “I believe the majority of men don’t expect women to go out and surgically alter their bodies to look like a *Playboy* centerfold. If a labioplasty is what you really think it will take to make you happy, it might be time to reexamine your idea of happiness.”³⁶

Berenholz, like many who sculpt designer vaginas, maintains that he is among the majority of physicians who doesn’t accept patients for this surgery unless they have a medically necessary reason.

But hold on. Professor Susan Hendrix, an OB/GYN at Wayne State University and director of the Women’s Health Initiative, doesn’t believe that. She said that pronounced labia hypertrophy is rare; in her sixteen years as an OB/GYN, she has done only “two or three” labioplasties. “Labioplasty is only done in very unusual or rare cases,” she explained, adding that complications may include

chronic pain and even inability to have sex. She finds the whole notion of undergoing labioplasty for aesthetic reasons “somewhat repulsive” because it implies that women “should worry about how their vagina looks.” She added that patients “rely on their doctors. To go out and establish something just for money? That’s disgusting that a physician would do that.”³⁷

Before there were easily available surgical alternatives, women complaining of loss of vaginal sensation during sex were routinely advised to do a simple muscle-training routine, sometimes involving a phalliclike instrument, known as Kegel exercises. Berenholz counters that the Kegel regimen doesn’t always work. “The people we see have done millions of Kegel exercises. There is no exercise that can help women recover from torn muscle and damage.”

That’s true, but Dr. Laura Berman, who runs a Chicago clinic that treats female sexual matters, believes that many women who fail to get help from Kegels aren’t doing the exercise correctly, although progress can be monitored by a device available without prescription. According to Berman, Kegels don’t strengthen another key area, the transverse abdominal muscles. Just building these muscles isn’t enough. “It’s learning how to use them during sex,” Berman told reporter Sarah Klein of the Detroit *Metro Times*. Often “women have these surgeries because some jerk told them they were too loose, when in fact *he* may have been too small.” Berman also said that when a woman learns to strengthen and control her pelvic floor muscles, “she can squeeze around any size she wanted to, even the size of a pinkie.”

Then there are women with the opposite problem. “I see a lot of women who have vestibulodynia [pain caused by a vagina that is too tight],” explained Dr. Hope Haefner, director of the University of Michigan’s Center for Vulvar Diseases, also speaking with the *Metro Times*. She is skeptical of the value of designer vagina surgery.

“I’d really like to see the studies that show this [surgery] really makes a difference in the long-term outcome of relationships,” she said. “I’d like to see studies that prove this is beneficial.”³⁸

Aside from aggressive marketing by cosmetic surgeons (a

Often “women have these surgeries because some jerk told them they were too loose, when in fact *he* may have been too small.”

Google search for “laser vaginal rejuvenation” turns up over 55,000 hits, the vast majority of them sites offering surgery), the other factor driving the increase in designer vagina surgery is media-fueled fashion influences. It’s everything from flimsier swimsuits to bikini waxing, to the ever-growing exposure to nudity in magazines, movies, cable television, and the Web, and the legitimization of pornography.³⁹

Catering to this growing desire for physical attractiveness has become an enormous industry. And an enormously profitable one.

CHAPTER 11

The Big Business of Beauty



*Give me your tired, your rich, your aging masses
yearning to be beautiful*

Boosting or amplifying an individual's physical attractiveness can be enormously profitable, especially for those who have both the ability to devise new products or services and the entrepreneurial chops to market them to a PA-hungry public.

There's no better example than Dr. David Matlock, whose surgery speciality discussed in the prior chapter has propelled him to fame and prosperity through the Laser Vaginal Rejuvenation Institute (LVRI). When Dr. Matlock realized how popular this surgical procedure had become, how many doctors were performing similar operations and how it seemed to be making most of them rich, he decided that he could—nay, should!—profit not only from his own

precision applications of the surgical laser, but from anyone using his techniques. Matlock (did I mention that he also has an MBA?) trademarked the terms “LVRI” and “vaginal rejuvenation” and patented some of his procedures.

Then he started a so-called “associate operation”—not, he emphasizes, a franchise. “The doctors are associates of LVRI,” he explained. “We taught and trained them in all techniques, and offered them a business model. We also offer support to these associates.”¹

That’s nothing like what Burger King does for its franchisees, right?

Matlock’s physician-associates enroll in his four-day course to learn surgical techniques to a tune approaching \$10,000 and then pay \$2,500 monthly fees for two years, totaling about \$70,000 per person. By early 2005 he had already enrolled over forty associates in the United States, Canada, Sweden, France, Indonesia, and Australia, adding about three million dollars to his coffers. Always pushing forward, the portion of his website targeted to gain more

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potential associates (www.drmatlock.com/physicians.asp, accessed August 14, 2007) to supplement his already sizeable surgical earnings, headlines: “No one in the world knows the LVRI business like I do. In 2006, my LVRI practice Gross Revenues were \$3,000,000.00 on just 360 cases. This is a normal year for me. David Matlock, MD, MBA, FACOG.” As for the many physicians using similar techniques and marketing them in terms that resemble Matlock’s trademarked LVRI and “vaginal re-

juvenation,” as the doctor identifies such practitioners, he dispatches cease-and-desist letters citing his patents and asserting trademark infringement.

Some doctors have expressed shock (or awe) about Matlock’s methods, but he stays on message with a rigor that would draw approving nods from any politician or public relations executive. Matlock knows why doctors want to be in the designer vagina business: It’s much more lucrative than standard OB/GYN or even conventional cosmetic surgery. In America, if you patent a unique

technique for, say, cooking a fowl from the inside out, and get legal trademark protection for “Inverse Cooking,” but subsequently learn that others are using your methods and calling them by similar names, you may either use the legal system to bar others from infringing on your patents and trademarks or forfeit further financial interest in your invention. If you don’t vigorously protect your intellectual property, you will lose it. So when Matlock tells other doctors that if they want to use his designer vagina techniques they must pay him a license fee, he is merely defend-
 ing his intellectual property.

And, of course, as Matlock reminds all who care to listen, his mission—and that of his clinic and associates—is not to line anyone’s pockets but “to empower women with knowledge, choice, and alternatives.”²

I do not cite Dr. Matlock to suggest that anything he did might possibly be unlawful. As far as I can tell, he has neither violated any ethi-

cal canon nor failed a patient in any way. I choose Matlock only because, in his own way, he is exemplar of a contemporary evolutionary lobe of the colorful New World creature *entrepreneurs americanus*, as much to be admired and maybe emulated as his philosophical forebears Eli Whitney, Thomas Edison, and Bill Gates.

Until the middle of the last century, cosmetic surgery was mostly focused on helping the tragically deformed. During World War II, thousands of Japanese were horribly burned by the fire-bombing of Tokyo and then by atomic bombs dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. A handful of Japanese surgeons and urologists turned their attentions to repairing and reconstructing their faces, but there were too many victims and not enough trained surgeons. Among the most tragic of these victims was a group of grotesquely disfigured adolescent girls dubbed the Hiroshima Maidens; their faces were distorted by thick scar tissue and their hands were bent into near-useless claws. In 1955, twenty-five of these young women were brought to the United States, where they endured a succession of cosmetic operations that helped restore their appearance to a semblance of normalcy.

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There were many other disfigured victims of the war, including thousands of American soldiers, and many of them also required plastic surgeons. When the supply of war-related cases began to thin, skills and techniques developed by Japanese and American surgeons were then redirected from therapeutic treatment to enhancing and redefining the nature of beauty.

During the U.S. occupation of Japan, for example, doctors injected young women's breasts with industrial-strength transformer coolant in a primitive and often hazardous attempt to meet the size expectations of American GIs. By the 1960s, topless showgirls in Las Vegas were having liquid silicone pumped into their breasts. By the seventies and eighties, silicone was packaged in gel form and promoted as a cure, as the American Society of Plastic Surgeons so delicately put it, for small breasts, which were defined as "deformities" and "a disease."³

Today, more physicians than ever are cashing in on the steadily increasing demand for cosmetic surgery. One of the greatest appeals of this field is that in this era of managed medical care, neither insurance companies nor government health agencies (such as Medicare) will underwrite elective procedures. So any doctor offering pay-as-you-go aesthetic surgery need not bargain with a powerful financial entity over his fee. Some patients bear the additional expense—doctors often charge for the consultation when a patient refuses the procedure—and the embarrassment of shopping for the best price, but aside from that, the plastic surgery candidate's only choice is take it or leave it. And, because they're dealing with individuals who either muster the cash or can whip out a credit card, doctors offering elective surgery don't have to wait months for a behemoth insurer to grudgingly cut them a check. For a piece of the action (a commission from the lender), some clinics even help patients arrange financing.⁴

Moreover, in nearly every U.S. state and Canadian province, any licensed physician can legally perform any medical procedure, including surgeries, whether board certified or not. Whether they have any special training or not. Whether they are surgeons or not.⁵

"When you graduate medical school, you have the ability to practice medicine and surgery," says Dr. Alan Gold, a spokesperson

for the American Society for Aesthetic Plastic Surgery (ASAPS), adding that even if he was, say, a specialist in internal medicine or a psychiatrist, in most states, “I’m able to do liposuction, face-lifts, deliver babies, do neural surgery—there’s no restriction on my license.” So, from coast to coast, more American obstetricians are segueing into liposuction; more ophthalmologists are opting for face-lifts; and more than a few dermatologists are taking on tummy tucks or cheek implants.⁶

And the shift is not limited to physicians: “Now there are dentists who are seeking the ability, in certain states, to do rhinoplasty and face-lift surgery,” said Gold. “It’s rather scary,” he added.⁷ In fact, Colorado dentists sought permission in 2003 from the state legislature to perform face-lifts, and almost succeeded. Doubtless they will try again.⁸ And, although California Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger first vetoed that state’s Senate Bill 1336, which would have authorized oral surgeons to perform elective cosmetic surgeries, he later signed, on October 4, 2006, California Senate Bill 438, which now allows dental surgeons to perform elective cosmetic surgeries.⁹

How do such doctors find new patients? These days, mostly by buying time on TV, often with slick, customized ad campaigns. Among the first uses of modern media marketing techniques to push elective surgery was a richly filmed 1990 video for Profiles & Contours, a budding two-doctor nip-and-tuck practice in New York City. The commercial plays off the hoary advertising tradition of promising consumers a chance to make themselves more sexually attractive. “My husband’s in love with a younger woman,” sighs a woman in one spot. “Me.” Set to a tasteful, new age piano score, the commercial, at first glance, might be confused with an ad to promote Chanel’s latest fragrance or a new Procter & Gamble shampoo.

More than fifteen years later, Profiles & Contours, the brain-child of Dr. Mark Erlich, a New Yorker with movie-star looks and P. T. Barnum’s marketing instincts, boasts clinics all over New York and Connecticut and offers an enormous range of procedures. It’s safe to say that Erlich hasn’t time to do most of them personally. It’s also safe to say that he’s a very wealthy fellow. He owes much

of his success to that original top-to-bottom marketing plan devised by professional admen who licensed the same ad to plastic surgeons in six other East Coast markets. It cost each practice a paltry \$3,800 per month to use the campaign, plus the cost of buying local TV time. “More and more, consumers are choosing the better marketer—and not the better surgeon,” claims a brochure targeting surgeons from Schell/Mullaney, the New York ad agency behind the original TV spot.¹⁰

“More and more, consumers are choosing the better marketer—and not the better surgeon.”

By 1990, plastic surgeons were spending only about \$30 million on ads, plus buying media time to air them.¹¹ Today, that’s not even a drop in the bucket. According to London’s respected *Economist* magazine, in 2003 alone the worldwide beauty business spent between \$32 billion and \$40 billion on advertising—and took in upwards of \$160 billion in sales. Nowhere did both advertising expense and sales income account for more bucks than in North America.¹²

For example, although advertising expenditures are not broken down for the cosmetic surgery industry, a March 13, 2007, TNS Media Intelligence (www.tns-mi.com) press release reporting that total advertising expenditures in the United States in 2006 were \$149.6 billion was followed by a June 12, 2007, press release projecting \$152.3 billion in 2007; and you can bet every corner of the beauty business will be continuing at least its proportionate share. In fact, a July 10, 2007, press release from the Publishers Information Bureau of the Magazine Publishers of America association (www.magazine.org) reported that expenditures for advertising in magazines had already risen for the first half of 2007 to nearly \$12 billion (\$11,838,362,224.00 to be precise). And, the category of “toiletries and cosmetics” was the number one magazine advertising category for the second quarter of 2007, in which “a boost for cosmetics and beauty aids and personal hygiene and health products accounted for the bulk” of the growth in advertising spending.

All this advertising worked: Cosmetic surgery is now a \$20 billion business in America.¹³ In 2007, The American Society for Aesthetic Plastic Surgery (ASAPS) lists about 2,400 member surgeons while the larger and older fraternity founded in 1931, the

American Society of Plastic Surgeons (ASPS) (with some overlap in memberships) lists more than 6,000 members. Between 1997 and 2003, the number of surgical cosmetic procedures performed by ASAPS members increased by more than 220 percent, and then by another 44 percent between 2003 and 2004. By 2006, ASAPS members revealed 11.5 million surgical and nonsurgical cosmetic procedures in the United States alone, a whopping 446 percent increase since 1997. And, of course, those figures do not account for procedures performed by doctors who are not board certified in aesthetic surgery and are not therefore ASAPS members. That's right: The work of all those urologists, internists, OB/GYNs, ophthalmologists, and others who have added cosmetic surgery to their repertoires isn't tabulated.¹⁴

Even so, the ASAPS numbers are amazing. Driven in part by the demand from aging and affluent baby boomers, residents of the United States paid for more than 11 million cosmetic procedures in 2006. To add a little perspective, in a similar year about one-sixth of that number, slightly over 1.8 million Americans, were awarded bachelor's, master's, and doctoral degrees, according to the U.S. Department of Education. And while nearly 85 percent as many Americans underwent liposuction (403,684) as earned a master's degree (481,118), a whopping 660 percent more received injections of Botox (3,181,592) than master's degrees. In fact, tally up the budgets of every sort of education in America and it is plain that we spend more each year on enhancing our PA than we do on education.

In other words, cosmetic surgery is big business. This kind of medicine is no longer about building a relationship of trust between a physician and a patient and learning what's best for the patient. In fact, a cosmetic surgery center today seems more like a restaurant that needs to turn tables over several times each meal to maximize profit. It's about moving a preferably endless line of patients through the company's operating suites as quickly as possible and marketing to those patients additional complementary services, such as skin care and nutrition counseling, as part of a total patient experience. It's about making more and more money.

The boom in cosmetic surgeries has also fueled the rise of

companies that manufacture specialized equipment used in aesthetic procedures. For example, about 1997, doctors learned how to apply intense light to the skin for such cosmetic purposes as removing unwanted hair, wrinkles, tattoos, sunspots, disfiguring acne, and port-wine stains. The first company to get Food and Drug Administration (FDA) clearance on a laser system for hair removal was Palomar Medical Technologies of Burlington, Massachusetts. By 2005, as smaller, cheaper, and more portable devices were developed and more and more doctors became trained to use them, consumers were spending about \$8 billion a year on such care. The worldwide market for equipment for these procedures is now sized at some \$600 million a year, an annual growth rate of more than 20 percent.¹⁵

• • •

Few American women today would consider leaving home without carrying makeup in their purses. In my childhood, somewhat after the middle of the last century, when my mother used cosmetics, she limited herself to lipstick, a touch of face powder, and perhaps hairspray. There were, of course, other products available, including skin creams, rouge, mascara, eye shadow, and hair coloring. In that era, however, the only women who regularly painted their faces and dyed their hair were those who performed on a theater stage, for the TV or movie screen, or in a bordello.

Go back a little further, to the early twentieth century, and the beauty industry was a struggling collection of small-time entrepreneurs. One was a Parisian named Eugene Schueller, who in 1909 founded the French Harmless Hair Dye Company. Another was Hamburg pharmacist Paul Beiersdorf. In 1911, he developed the first cream that could chemically bind oil and water. The former company is now known as L'Oréal and is the world's leader in the industry. Beiersdorf's firm became Nivea, which today markets products in 150 nations and is the world's best-known personal-care brand. Both companies compete with Shiseido, a company founded in the same era when Arinobu Fukuhara formulated a skin lotion that was Japan's first cosmetic based on a scientific formula.

In the United States, the beauty industry's rise to prominence

grew out of the rivalry between two American women. Elizabeth Arden opened the first modern beauty salon in 1910; a few years later Helena Rubinstein, a Polish immigrant, followed suit. Both supposed that beauty and health were interlinked and combined facials with diet and exercise classes, a holistic approach to which the industry is just now returning. Arden pioneered beauty branding with iconic gold and pink packaging. Together with Max Factor, who initially built his business

In the United States, the beauty industry's rise to prominence grew out of the rivalry between two American women.

around the needs of Hollywood film studio makeup departments, Arden and Rubinstein built the foundations of modern marketing, enticing consumers with such innovative tactics as celebrity endorsements and magazine advertorials. In the 1930s, Revlon and then, a decade later, Estée Lauder entered the industry and successfully competed with the pioneers.

These companies, along with L'Oréal, Nivea, and Shiseido, remain active in the marketplace and together field thousands of beauty products under hundreds of brands, producing billions of dollars in sales. The August 2007 "Personal Products: Global Industry Guide" sold by Datamonitor (www.marketresearch.com) reported the global market for personal care products—skin care, hair care, makeup, oral hygiene, personal hygiene, and over-the-counter health care—grew to \$251.1 billion in 2006. It forecasts a 23.1 percent increase to a market value over the next five years of \$309 billion in 2011.

Just as the media business has become a competition between a handful of gigantic multinationals, so too has the beauty industry consolidated. Enormous and diversified companies such as Unilever and Procter & Gamble, seeing growth opportunities beyond their traditional household products divisions, have acquired product lines of beauty brands. Traditional beauty industry giants have also snapped up innovative younger brands. A few years ago, for example, Japan's Kao Corporation bought John Frieda as a route into one of the market's fastest-growing segments, hair coloring. LVMH, the multinational behemoth whose diverse brands include Moët Champagne, Hennessy spirits, Christian Dior fragrances,

Donna Karan, Givenchy, and Louis Vuitton, to name only a few, bought Hard Candy and Urban Decay, two funky young makeup brands. Meanwhile, Estée Lauder acquired Stila, MAC, and Bobbi Brown, up-and-coming names at that time in the hotly competitive makeup marketplace. Even though, in the dynamic corporate takeover and buyout worlds, Estée Lauder sold Stila in 2006 while LVMH sold Hard Candy and Urban Decay in 2005, just six multinationals currently continue to account for 80 percent of American makeup sales, while eight brands control more than two-thirds of the skin-care market.¹⁶

So, investing in the beauty business is big business. Industry insiders value the global cosmetics and grooming market at more than \$230 billion. Marketing research experts project \$13 billion for the beauty market in China alone by 2009, and, already, L'Oréal conducts 35,000 consumer interviews there annually, give or take a few. These efforts pay, big-time. Industry leader L'Oréal, still Paris based and now the world's largest cosmetics merchant, generated annual sales of \$15.8 billion in 2006 as it met the ever-demanding market to enhance PA. The company, with operations in more than 100 countries, supports more than 60,000 employees of whom more than 2,000 are chemists. Continuing the pace, L'Oréal registered second-quarter sales in 2007 at \$5.86 billion, which, if sustained as suspected for the year's four quarters, will at minimum exceed \$23 billion in 2007 revenue.¹⁷

With so much at stake, the beauty industry invests heavily in marketing, including advertising and cross-promotions. And companies are not above a little hocus-pocus now and then. While some scientific breakthroughs do happen, the beauty industry's investment in research and development averages only a fifth, or less, of that for pharmaceuticals. They have introduced "cosmeceuticals," new products that blur the line between cosmetics and over-the-counter drugs. L'Oréal's advertisements often stress how many product patents it has filed, and indeed, some new ideas, including face cloths impregnated with cleansers that combine surfactant and paper technology, have come to market.

Other products are more hype than fact, pseudoscience in the service of sales. Shiseido's ads for "Body Creator" skin gel claim

that its pepper and grapefruit oil are fat-burners that can melt away over two pounds of body fat in a month without the need to diet or exercise. When it was introduced in 2002, Japanese customers bought a bottle every 3.75 seconds. Not to be outdone, advertising for Avon's Cellu-Sculpt cream claims to take an inch off thighs in four weeks. Other brands play the game different ways: P&G plugged the science underlying development of Olay Regenerist and built Pantene into the world's biggest hair-care brand on the basis of a vitamin B ingredient, despite the fact that vitamins cannot be absorbed through the skin or hair.¹⁸

But we live in a media age, where every sort of dream is manufactured and sold as reality. All too often, Americans do not stop to realize that there is a vast gulf between what is presented on a flickering screen and the real world. Yet everything, every single item that appears in a picture, every word spoken, every sound heard, is a creation of the production and has some specific purpose in being put before the audience. To forget this is to forget that a movie or TV show is merely entertainment. And while one may sometimes learn valid life lessons from art, it is art, it is artifice, it is not reality—it is a construct from beginning to end.

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Still, how many who watched the 1969 film *True Grit* identified with Rooster Cogburn, the character played by the actor John Wayne? In this film Wayne is an aging, overweight hero who, despite deteriorating abilities, redeems himself and overcomes the physical limitations of age. Near the end of the movie, actress Kim Darby, as the lissome Mattie Ross, tells Wayne that he is too old, too rotund, to jump a horse over a fence. "Well, come and see a fat old man sometime," drawls Wayne before galloping his mount and leaping over the corral gate.

Wayne was probably Hollywood's biggest superstar ever. Paradoxically, he earned little critical respect for his acting ability. Yet this single act of cinematic bravado in *True Grit* probably cinched his only Best Actor Oscar, capstone to a lengthy and lucrative career lacking only in award nominations. Surely most in the film industry knew that Wayne distrusted horses and was anything but physically

brave; he schemed mightily to avoid military service in World War II and relied on stunt doubles whenever anything risky arose in a script. In *True Grit*, as Wayne wheeled his horse toward the gate, director Henry Hathaway yelled, “Cut!” Wayne dismounted—corset, toupee, and all—and an identically costumed stuntman took his place in the saddle. The cameras rolled and the stuntman jumped the wall. All it took was a bit of cutting-room flimflam for audiences to see The Duke sail over the fence toward his Oscar. There was nothing unusual here; that’s how things happen in reel life that can’t happen in real life.¹⁹

The members of the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, most of them quite mature and experienced in the ways of Hollywood, surely knew how movies were made. But those who voted for Wayne’s Oscar saw what they chose to see and believed, if only for a time, that the movie, not the man, was the myth.

• • •

The astonishing growth of the beauty industry has been fueled by synergy between the enormous reach and power of the media and entertainment industries combined with the PA phenomenon with its own strengths and dimensions. Each feeds the other: Advertising in magazines and on television depicts beautiful people living glamorous lifestyles, all in an effort to sell consumers goods and services of every sort. Some of the revenues thus generated underwrite the entertainment industry by paying for television shows and movies. Other ad money provides profit margins for publications. In turn, all of this together promulgates the power and persuasiveness of PA.

Meanwhile, entertainment promotes the careers and peddles the products—music CDs, movie tickets, DVDs, television programs, clothing lines, merchandise of every ilk—of beautiful, glamorous celebrities. These worthies, in turn, appear in advertising to hawk consumer products.

In our celebrity-worshipping culture, a youthful appearance is held up as the ideal. Media messages promote the idea that science and technology will allow us to retain our youth, our beauty. Science and technology did not create our fascination with beauty and

youth, but they have helped to exaggerate our fear of growing old and of accepting that life is irreversible: Eventually, everyone's body runs down.

And even as advances in PA technologies enhance our struggle to retain a youthful appearance with beauty aids, cosmetic surgery, and hormone replacement, it does so not for our benefit but to promote the beauty industries. To keep the money taps open, the purveyors of youth and beauty products join the media and entertainment industries in seeking to control how we view and measure ourselves, to influence what is deemed important by society, to define what determines physical attractiveness, and to dictate what we must do to achieve an ideal self.

So we are awash in an image tsunami, swimming on a tide of beautiful illusions. It becomes harder and harder to distinguish the reel from the real, to remember that in the end the purpose of all this beauty and glamour, always, is to help somebody make money. Always.

We are genetically programmed to feel and respond to the lures of the physically attractive. We want to look more beautiful. We want to be around better-looking people, watch beautiful people on glowing screens, read about the lives of beautiful people. And yet, even as more and more people spend more and more money on beauty products, as more and more people risk their lives and health to undergo more and more aesthetic surgeries, or struggle to overcome distorted impressions of their own PA inadequacies, it is plain that few people actually feel better about their own PA. In fact, as a worldwide study commissioned by Unilever's Dove brands (to help sell its own beauty products!) shows, few women feel beautiful at all.²⁰

And yet. Some people wonder why cosmetic surgery is marketed like makeup and bought as casually as a Wonderbra. Yet we live in a time when in some upscale communities, parents think that breast implants are a good thing to give their daughters as high school graduation presents. Eighty-eight-year-old women choose to undergo breast reduction surgery—and find doctors willing to perform it. Nowadays, too, the “reveal party” has replaced the Tupperware gathering; instead of looking over kitchen products, housewives

shriek with joy and shed tears over the result of a friend's "extreme makeover," a personal body renovation project.²¹

And yet. When anthropologists studied northwest Kenya's reclusive Ariaal tribe, an isolated, nomadic community of some 10,000 souls without access to television or magazines, they sought to determine if their body-image stereotypes had been influenced by media from the outside world. One researcher showed the nomads pictures of various men representing a variety of body types. "The girls like the ones like this," he said, pointing to a slender man built much like himself.

Another researcher showed a group of several Ariaal men a copy of *Men's Health* magazine with pictures of impossibly well-sculpted bodybuilders. The nomads admired the chiseled forms. "That one, I like," said an elder, pointing at a photo of a curvy woman who clearly worked out regularly.

Another old-timer gazed at the bulging pectoral muscles of a male bodybuilder and scratched his head. "Was it a man," he wondered aloud, "or a very, very strong woman?"²²

We live in a time of self-improvement and makeovers. But when we look in the mirror, the image gazing back at us seems so strange and divorced from reality, and so distorted.

Do we need a makeover?

Or is it our culture that needs the extreme makeover?

EPILOGUE

Rising Above the Effects of Lookism



*If you can't do everything, then at least don't
do nothing*

Lookism flourishes. A person's looks have become more important than ever in everything from celebrity-driven media to popular topics in personal conversations.

Good looks make a difference today and most likely always will. This fact translates into rather endless pursuits of greater PA by individuals and encouraged by society. It doesn't matter whether we label it "lookism" when a person's PA impacts the way she is treated by others, or if we use the broader umbrella term "PA phenomenon." Varied adages apply: People do judge people (as well as books) by their covers. Appearances extend far beyond what meets the eye. Beauty may be skin deep, but its effects run much deeper.

What solution can disentangle disparities between people of different levels of PA?

PA is caused partly by nature and partly by nurture, and no simple and easy solution exists to change this reality. It results from a complicated synergy of drives by individuals and influences by our society. Popular culture today often admires extreme makeovers that alter the looks of an individual, but our culture itself could benefit from an extreme makeover of other sorts; otherwise the proverbial playing field of life will never be level for individuals of higher and lower PA.

Whatever our indignities and resolve, we can neither avoid lookism nor eliminate it from society. In life, we interact all the time with people who do—consciously or unconsciously—make judgments about us based on what we look like. Nevertheless, each of us can realistically challenge realities of lookism and rise above it.

For too long, people not affected negatively by discrimination—aligned with differences based on race, sex, PA, and so forth—believed life to be a reasonably level playing field. At best, their insensitivity was inadvertent.

Intentional or not, ignorance, denial, and “turning a blind eye” did not vanish discrimination due to racism and sexism and won’t vanish discrimination due to lookism. And, specific to those individuals who possess higher PA, I urge you to keep in mind a pertinent thought from novelist Teena Booth: “If there is one thing worse than being an ugly duckling in a house of swans, it’s having the swans pretend there’s no difference.”

• • •

Evolutionary theory seems to predict eventual disappearance of less than high PA, which would resolve lookism. Dynamics of natural selection en route to survival of the fittest explains this theoretical proposition. It begins with notions that people who possess higher PA also possess greater power to attract more opportunities to produce more offspring than their counterparts. Hypothetically, over zillions of years, fewer and fewer people of lesser PA would be born in this scenario until only people of greater PA would be producing offspring.

Of course, none of us will be around to observe the veracity of such speculative aeonian musings that transcend infinite generations to come. In the meantime, tangible actions currently underway demonstrate corrective steps for our lives today and for the lives of future generations.

Medical and psychological professions now formally acknowledge PA-related illnesses. Official medical diagnoses and treatments address obsessive beliefs and exaggerated focuses concerning a person's looks, such as body dysmorphic disorder (BDD), anorexia, and bulimia. In another development, University of Pennsylvania Health System has established the Center for Human Appearance. It is the first-ever interdisciplinary academic center dedicated to the study and treatment of disorders and quality-of-life issues interconnected with appearance.

At a mass media level and in demonstration of corporate social responsibility, the multinational company Unilever sponsors the Campaign for Real Beauty. That widely disseminated message aligned with Dove personal-care products emphasizes that beauty comes with many different looks, in different shapes, sizes, colors, and ages. A companion program, Dove Real Beauty Workshop for Girls, deals with the impact of looks in the lives of girls eight to twelve years old.

Specific not-for-profit organizations help challenge lookism as well as contend with it. These groups frequently focus on statistically measurable determinants of PA as referenced in their titles—for example, the National Association to Advance Fat Acceptance and the Little People of America.

Face to Face: The National Domestic Violence Project represents another constructive step. It aims to reverse the negative effects experienced by particular individuals due to societal discrimination from lookism. At no cost to recipients, it provides cosmetic surgery to correct PA damage caused by domestic physical abuse.

Parents can and should be conscientious about communications to their children, being careful not to promulgate long-established inequalities aligned with PA differences. This begins with careful presentation of classic children's stories such as *Cinderella*, *Hansel*

and Gretel, and *Snow White*. These traditional classics equate beauty with good that merits reward accordingly, while equating bad, wicked, and evil with people who lack good looks.

Parents need to be aware that actions speak louder than words, and children will internalize value differences, even if a negative message wasn't intended to be communicated. Unhealthy pursuits of greater PA can be unintentionally demonstrated through unhealthy dieting and excessive exercise when the purpose is to achieve better looks rather than better health. Adults who diet and exercise primarily for better looks, and secondarily for better health, send powerful messages that promulgate lookism. The same applies for pursuits of cosmetic surgeries to enhance PA and dinnertime conversations that communicate greater appeal, popularity, and value concerning better-looking friends, neighbors, and media personalities.

Legal options exist. Individuals can work with elected government officials to generate pertinent laws and can file personal lawsuits. Although legal means to alleviate lookism pose difficulties, they do offer possibilities.

The difficulties center on the inability to easily define the physical attractiveness variable. Therefore, plaintiffs usually articulate surrogate measures such as weight, height, and a list of protected-class demographic variables. A 2003 lawsuit against upscale retailer Abercrombie & Fitch initially claimed employment discrimination based on physical attractiveness differences. The plaintiffs later changed their claim to discrimination based on protected-class demographics of race and ethnicity.

Proceedings from the lawsuit against Abercrombie & Fitch identified company employment decisions definitely favorable for persons with high PA and unfavorable for their counterparts. Although employment decisions that discriminate based on PA are not illegal currently, the line is thin between legal and illegal. The decisions become illegal if the PA factor can be proved to be a surrogate bias actually based on age, sex, ethnicity, or disability.

Arguments that the Americans with Disabilities Act should apply to people with less than good looks have not (yet) found favor in court. Existing lookism-related laws apply mostly to tangible aspects

of PA and then only in specific municipalities. Santa Cruz, California, outlaws employment decisions based on height, weight, or physical characteristics; San Francisco and the state of Michigan do so for height and weight; and Washington, DC, does so for personal appearance. However, other than officially sanctioned protected classes that might be argued inseparable from appearance features, there are not yet substantive laws to protect discriminatory actions due to lookism.

In conclusion, regardless of what we try to do about it, a person's PA matters in this day and age. Evidence documents that higher and lower PA corresponds with benefits and detriments, respectively. To rise above this reality, people must first know themselves. Beyond that, people need to maintain their awareness of their judgments about others and be sensitive about their corresponding interactions.

And, now that you are knowledgeable about lookism, know that the next time you are drawn to one person over another, your reasons might not be as admirable or as rational or even as fair as you would like to think they are.

RISING ABOVE LOOKISM: CASES OF TWO INDIVIDUALS

Don't overlook yourself as you choose to resist the PA phenomenon and rise above lookism. Look first at your own views, attitudes, and behaviors concerning your own PA. It is an important early step as you move to alter your judgments about others—mates, children, coworkers, friends, politicians, strangers, elected officials, and others—and change your interactions accordingly.

Are you a wannabe Ken or Barbie? Are you overly focused on your looks? Are you pursuing unrealistic levels of PA? Are your concerns and pursuits of PA causing problems in your life, work, and relationships? Are you unhappy with your looks or yourself?

Consider the following two individuals, Jennifer and Douglas. PA phenomenon negatively affects both. It impacts their minds and

lives. Although they focus on different physical features, express different thoughts, experience different emotional triggers, and exhibit different behaviors, both of them suffer unhappiness with their looks.

How these two people deal with their unhappiness about their PA produces ineffective results that prove increasingly counterproductive. Jennifer compensates with unaffordable purchases of expensive brands of clothes, hair care, and cosmetics. At the same time, Botox injections register high as a future priority for her, and she has slashed exercise opportunities from her day because others might see her body shape too closely. Douglas responds with much different compensatory behaviors concerning the disliked aspects of his PA. For example, he minimizes valuable work and nonwork interactions when the situations might require him to stand next to taller people. Attitudinally, his self-perceived lack of desired PA causes him to increasingly resent his lot in life.

Jennifer

Jennifer is a pleasant twenty-eight-year-old woman with a college degree, a solid job, and a loving husband. Objective measures confirm her height as average and weight as proportionate. People consider Jennifer to be a nice person who performs her work well, dresses nicely, and looks good. Her husband likes her appearance and occasionally compliments her accordingly.

Jennifer is certainly not clinically obsessive, but substantial difference exists between how the world views her and how she views herself. Picking apart her overall good looks, Jennifer feels neutral about many aspects of appearance that determine her PA, although she feels positive about two of her features: her hair and eyes. However, the dislike she feels about other aspects of her appearance produces an offsetting negative balance.

Although she comments sometimes about displeasing features of her appearance, she hides the extent of her true dislike. Numerous times a week the dislike surfaces in her mind, often triggered by one of several recurring situations. Whenever she steps on a scale, the number exceeds her elusive target weight. As she walks past

reflective windows she regularly notices her shape to be different from her ideal. Certain clothing styles make her uncomfortable because they seem, to her, to amplify disliked parts of her body. Her thighs cause the greatest displeasure, and she thinks, “I would die from embarrassment if people saw me at the swimming pool or fitness center. I will never be beautiful with these thunder thighs of mine. I need a potent dose of liposuction.”

Almost any time she meets a new person, be it a social or work setting, she attempts to cover or shield less desired parts of her appearance that seem to stand out. Most frequently, it is her mouth, due to the shade of her teeth, which she wants whiter. Advertising has registered firmly in her mind the negative impression a person’s smile can make if the teeth are less than gleaming white. Comments by friends about others with unappealing teeth reinforce the message. Similarly, media reports and product advertising for antiwrinkle injections have an influence on Jennifer and her girlfriends, who talk about Botox and Restylane during lunchtime conversations. Potential benefits from these injections rush to Jennifer’s thoughts whenever she gets up close to a mirror and sees the start of a visible forehead wrinkle or two.

How does Jennifer deal with her negative feelings concerning her PA? Not well. And it translates into not-good behaviors.

Unchecked, lookism pushes Jennifer into detrimental behaviors. Her attention and thoughts about her PA translate into unhealthy attitudes and actions. The tendency to emphasize negatives about her appearance while forcing out any positive thinking, such as the good she feels about her hair and eyes, pulls down her self-esteem and confidence. She increasingly speculates that people scrutinize her looks with unfavorable conclusions. As a result, she has begun to avoid swimming pools because of the revealing nature of swimwear, and fitness centers because attendees often wear form-fitting clothes, and she stays clear of bathroom scales altogether.

As a solution to alleviate unhappiness with her PA, Jennifer has increased spending beyond her means in three areas: clothes, hair care, and cosmetics. Her latest clothing preferences are loose-fitting styles that seem to disguise parts of her appearance that she particularly dislikes. These purchases increasingly favor more expensive

brands because they seem to better enhance her looks. Unreasonably large credit card balances reflect her growing preferences for popular brand-name products when dealing with possibilities to look better. In turn, looming money problems have become frequent points of contention in her marriage.

What does Jennifer need to do to best rise above the influence of lookism within herself?

The answer: She needs to realistically challenge reality. Whether through objective self-evaluation or with the assistance of another person able to be objective, Jennifer needs to reorient her thoughts and behaviors concerning PA. One helpful approach requires her to construct a list of specific statements that organize her thinking and guide her into positive thoughts and behaviors, such as the affirming “I need to . . .” statements listed here.

- “I need to keep in mind that my good job and happy marriage do not depend on looking better.”
- “I need to realize that my current looks do not threaten either my job or marriage.”
- “I need to admit that my problems with my excessive credit charges are caused by my actions to buy things in hopes of achieving unrealistic, as well as unnecessary, levels of PA.”
- “I need to analyze carefully my financial situation before spending even more on my looks by getting Botox or other antiwrinkle injections, which are expensive, temporary, and can produce fake-looking effects.”
- “I need to have good thoughts about myself. I need to remind myself every so often about the features I like about my looks, such as my hair and my eyes.”
- “I need to reassure myself that my husband loves me and my current looks, and I need to remember that every so often people at work compliment me on my good looks.”
- “I need to be more comfortable about my looks.”

- “I need to prohibit my looks from dictating whether or not I attend social events.”
- “I need to adjust my emotions so that I don’t get upset when I see myself in a mirror or when I see my reflection in a store window.”
- “I need to stop comparing my looks to those of the beautiful people I see.”
- “I need to remind myself that experts in cosmetics apply the makeup and experts in photography and computer technologies almost always alter the photos of famous people in magazines and on TV.”
- “I need to stop hating my thighs.”
- “I need to be less critical about my weight and body shape.”
- “I need to resist my habit of using storefront windows as mirrors.”
- “I need to reduce the time that I spend to decide what to wear before going anywhere.”
- “I need to get back to swimming because I enjoy it and it is a good exercise.”
- “I need to eliminate my recently developed fear of embarrassment concerning what people will think about my weight and shape if they see me at the swimming pool in a swimsuit.”
- “I need to improve my diet choices to emphasize foods for overall better health, rather than just thinking about dieting only to look better.”
- “I need to get back into the habit of working out at a fitness center. And I need to exercise more for the primary purposes of good health, rather than for purposes of good looks alone.”

Douglas

Douglas is forty-one years old and a successful midlevel executive who works as a senior financial analyst. Four years ago, his marriage

of nearly ten years ended in divorce. Although he is shorter than the typical American man, his looks appear average and his weight is proportionate, although he has a slight “beer belly” that protrudes moderately.

Despite quite average PA, Doug finds much fault with his looks. His relatively short height of five feet six inches causes the greatest distress. On top of that, his wished-for crowning glory grows less glorious every day. Advancing male pattern baldness shows his substantially thinning hair and receding hairline. And the sight each morning in his bathroom mirror as he prepares for work inflicts another dose of psychological pain. Close-up, he regularly notes each hair lost since last tally.

Physical realities amplified by idealized wants and derogatory self-perceptions provide a recipe for much unhappiness. With more than a little hidden seriousness, he jokes that fate glanced away when it came to him inheriting good looks. He frequently lists specifics: horrible short height, awful thin and thinning hair, terrible elongated nose, and an embarrassing, nonathletic build. Complicating matters, Doug finds no joy in having passed forty. He has started to notice droopy eyelids and pays more attention to media reports about the popularity of cosmetic blepharoplasty surgery for middle-age executives and salesmen.

Anytime that anything displeasing about his appearance enters his consciousness, it quickly sends Doug into a grumpy mood for several days. To worsen his mood, he then spends entirely too much time in front of mirrors analyzing and reanalyzing his features. Accompanying frustration sparks a number of recurring thoughts: “I’m fighting a losing battle. I’m short, old, and balding. Every day things get worse for me: I lose more hair, my gut grows, and my height probably even shrinks.”

Torturously connected to his looks, Doug has developed a restrained hostility toward women. He’s convinced that he will never again find an attractive woman for a mate because, in his mind, he lacks the necessary stereotypical PA admired on television, in movies, in magazines, and throughout society overall.

Appearances can be deceiving. Despite being a very unhappy camper, Doug exhibits a positive personal veneer at work equal to

his achieved professional success. Generally, he functions fine on the job when dealing with the tasks and demands of the position. The bugaboo emerges outside of work and somewhat during free time at work.

How does Doug deal with his negative feelings concerning his PA? Not well, and it translates into not-good behaviors.

Unchecked, lookism pushes Doug toward behaviors counter to success at work and beyond work. With height at the top of his mind, he tends to distance himself physically from taller people. Two specific office situations that he tends to avoid are impromptu water-cooler chats and conversations at business networking events, because in these settings people typically stand while talking. Also, if someone he's talking to seems to stare at his nose, Doug uses his hand to minimize sight of his nose, a sometimes-obvious mannerism that's also employed by people embarrassed by the appearance of their teeth.

To alleviate unhappiness with his PA, Doug endlessly seeks solutions to fix his self-perceived physical defects in pursuit of more handsome looks. Many would-be solutions cost too much or prove ineffective for Doug. Ensuing desperation motivates him to search the Internet too frequently and too long.

Although he has searched top to bottom and head to toe for solutions, he's thus far carried through with relatively few purchases. Things on the back burner for him, for the time being, include a powder spray to darken his balding scalp, a hairpiece in some undetectable form, and shoe inserts to gain an inch or two of height. In the meantime, he dyes his gray hair, spends substantially on ineffective hair-growth products, wears a cap in more situations than reasonable, and has begun to "conceal" his hair loss with a negligible comb-over style that has potential to become increasingly architectural.

What does Doug need to do, to rise above the influence of lookism within himself?

The answer: He needs to realistically challenge reality. Whether through objective self-evaluation or with the assistance of another person able to be objective, Douglas needs to reorient his thoughts and behaviors concerning PA. He can start by constructing a list of

specific statements that organize his thinking and guide him into positive thoughts and behaviors. Doug must learn to repeat affirming “I need to . . .” statements. For example:

- “I need to remember that I have a good job and a successful career that I’ve achieved with my current looks.”
- “I need to be honest with myself and remember that I am fortunate to be employed as I am, and that my looks do not threaten my job.”
- “I need to stop avoiding conversations at social events in and out of work settings just because I am uncomfortable standing next to taller people.”
- “I need to stop dwelling on my height.”
- “I need to accept that I am shorter than average, and I need to remind myself about the many successful and popular men who stand with equal or less height.”
- “I need to accept that I never was and never will be a muscleman. At the same time, I need to exercise to improve my fitness and, secondarily, to improve or at least maintain my body build.”
- “I need to accept my age and the looks that go with it. At forty-one, I am in the prime of my life. I have a great job, excellent health, many friends, and overall I look quite good.”
- “I need to start focusing efforts on exercise and diet routines for purposes of achieving better health, rather than just thinking in terms of better looks.”
- “I need to get real about my hair loss. I have more hair than many men my age, and I need to remind myself about the many successful and popular men with equal or less hair.”
- “I need to accept the look of my hair. And I need to rule out buying a hairpiece of any sort since high-quality ones cost too much and they still can look fake.”
- “I need to be aware of the best hairstyle for my type of hair,

which tends to be shorter rather than longer and certainly is not a comb-over style.”

- “I need to discontinue considering gimmicks like unproven hair-growth products and powder spray dye to make my underlying scalp less noticeable.”
- “I need to avoid analyzing and reanalyzing the length of my nose.”
- “I need to reassure myself periodically that not all women are attracted to all men. And I need to reassure myself that women who are not interested in me romantically might very likely feel that way based on factors completely unrelated to my looks.”
- “I need to be realistic concerning how ‘hot’ or ‘great looking’ a woman needs to be before I am interested in dating her.”
- “I need to be cognizant that I have many friends who include attractive women.”
- “I need to explicitly remember, particularly when I start criticizing myself, that I’ve had my share of girlfriends. I’ve even been happily married to an attractive woman, whom I divorced for reasons unrelated to my looks, and I know that marriage to the right woman will again happen for me.”
- “I need to limit my Internet time in regard to searching for the latest, greatest product to improve whatever physical feature that I might be focusing on at the moment.”
- “I need to have good thoughts about myself. I need to remind myself every so often about the features I like about my looks, such as my great smile and eyes, which people compliment me on.”

• • •

If you can’t do everything, then at least don’t do nothing! Sure, society reflects the forceful perspective of collective individuals, but individuals can wield much discretion. You can challenge lookism

and you can lessen the power and pervasiveness of the PA phenomenon. It begins with knowing yourself. It is followed by your awareness of how you judge others, and becoming more sensitive in your corresponding interactions with other people.

You have already begun. Your knowledge and awareness of the well-documented advantages associated with higher PA and the disadvantages associated with lower PA represent an important positive step.

Notes



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