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Cross-Cultural Perspectives on Body Size

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Abstract

Evidence of cross-cultural differences in beauty ideals belies the claim that such ideals a “natural” part of the human psyche, rather than being reflective of cultural and social practices. In this chapter, I examine evidence of cross-cultural variation in one specific beauty standard, namely women’s body size ideals. I present evidence of historical variation in what was perceived as the ideal body size across world regions, but also show how these variations have narrowed more recently. In explanation, this chapter will show how both Westernisation and socioeconomic development bring sociocultural changes that promote a thin ideal. I examine evidence in favour of both explanations, and conclude by suggestion that feminist theory offers the potential for a unifying perspective to better understand the nature and role of beauty ideals.

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Introduction

In April 2015, the fitness and sports nutrition store began a “beach body ready” advertising campaign in the UK, which featured a bikini-clad model next to the question: “Are you beach body ready?” Despite sparking a huge backlash – including an online petition that attracted more than 70,000 signatures – centered around the fact that the advertisement objectified women, was socially irresponsible, and implied that other body shapes were inferior, the UK Advertising Standards Authority ruled that the campaign was “unlikely to cause serious or widespread offence” (Sweeney, 2015). Protein World maintained a combative stance throughout, with its chief executive likening protestors to “terrorists” and defending the advertisements as “aspirational” (Gander, 2015). Implicit in these counter-arguments was the claim that a thin beauty ideal is rooted in human biology and, therefore, “natural”. By implication, running an advertising campaign that centered on a “natural” beauty ideal merely reflected human psychological imperatives.

This perspective is most often supported by evolutionary psychological claims that human attractiveness preferences are stable across time and cultures. Such stability, it is argued, mean that beauty ideals and attractiveness preferences are part of human biological, rather than cultural, heritage (Buss, 1999). More precisely, beauty ideals are argued to be related to reproductive fitness-enhancing benefits, which may be direct (those that increase an individual’s reproductive success by benefiting the individual and any offspring) or indirect (those that increase the individual’s inclusive fitness) that evolved in human ancestral populations. To the extent that all living humans are the products of ancestral pairings and, therefore, share the same genetic endowment, “mental modules”, perceptual mechanisms, or some variation of this, universality in beauty ideals across time and cultures is to be expected. Proof of cross-cultural similarity in beauty ideals is, *ipso facto*, proof of that ancestral endowment and evidence of the “naturalness” of beauty ideals (Singh, 1993).

Do Cross-Cultural Differences Exist?

Setting aside shoddy evolutionary psychological theorizing (see Swami & Salem, 2011), what is the evidence that beauty ideals are stable and, therefore, natural outcomes of human biology? A review of temporal changes in beauty ideals within cultures is beyond the purview of this chapter, but suffice to say that there is little evidence of stability over time. Consider the example of the thin ideal that featured in the Protein World advertisements: such a body would have been very unlikely to have been idealized by human ancestral populations (Wood, 2006), it was certainly not idealized during the European Enlightenment when Rubens was painting voluptuous muses (Swami, Gray, & Furnham, 2007), and nor did it become the standard ideal before the proliferation of mass media in the 1920s helped to ensure a homogenized view of women's beauty (Banner, 2006; Calogero, Boroughs, & Thompson, 2007). Nor are such temporal changes limited to women's beauty ideals: studies suggest that cultural norms of the ideal male body have become more muscular over time (Leit, Pope, & Gray, 2001). Anyone who has a passing interest in the James Bond films can attest to the increasing pronouncement of muscularity in Daniel Craig's portrayal of bond compared to, say, Sean Connery's more mediocre physique.

Beyond temporal changes, what is the evidence of stability of beauty ideals across cultures? Evidence of variation is not difficult to find, even once we move beyond culture-specific beauty practices, such as the neck-rings worn by Kayan women in Myanmar (Khoo Thwe, 2006). Consider again the example of women's thinness: it has long been known that there are cross-cultural differences in attitudes toward body fat, obesity, and thinness (Brown & Konner, 1987; Sobal & Stunkard, 1989). Traditionally, a distinction was drawn in the 20th century between the preference for relatively thin figures in Westernized settings and the preference for relatively plump in non-Westernized, "traditional" settings (Swami, 2015). For example, in many non-Western cultures, plumpness was linked with heightened perceptions of self-worth, sexuality, femininity, and fertility (Ghannam, 1997; Treloar et al., 1999). In some societies, where women attained status through motherhood, greater body fat was also perceived as a symbol of maternity and nurturance (Powdermaker, 1960).

Some of the best evidence of cross-cultural differences in body size ideals comes from anthropological research in the South Pacific. Traditionally, fatness among South Pacific Islanders was associated with high status, authority, wealth, and – among women specifically – sexuality and femininity (Pollock, 1995). Indeed, various scholars have described rituals in Pacific societies where women and men, typically from high-ranking families, take part in deliberate fattening prior to marriage (Pollock, 1995). Furthermore, empirical work has documented significant differences in ideal body size between South Pacific Islanders and comparable groups in New Zealand or Australia (Becker, 1995; Brewis & McGarvey, 2000). The former was also less likely to regard themselves as overweight or obese, even when very large (Brewis, McGarvey, Jones, & Swinburn, 1998). Of course, South Pacific Islanders were not unique in their idealization of a larger body size. Similar findings have also been reported among many different cultural groups from across the world (for a review, see Swami, 2015).

Cross-cultural differences in beauty ideals clearly exist – or, at the very least, have existed in recent history. But do they still exist today? Studies conducted in the past decade have suggested that differences across cultures may be narrowing. For example, studies now consistently report no significant differences in ideal body size between Western and non-Western participants in urban settings (e.g., Swami & Tovée, 2005), including in the South Pacific (Swami, Knight, Tovée, Davies, & Furnham, 2007). Data from the International Body Project, one of the largest cross-cultural surveys of body size ideals with data from nearly 7,500 participants in 26 countries (Swami et al., 2010), provides further evidence for the homogenization of a thin ideal globally. The results of the study showed that, while there were significant differences in ideal women's body size across world regions, the effect sizes were very small and participants from all urban sites rated a relatively slim female figure as the ideal.

However, this is not to say that the idealization of thinness is now a universal phenomenon. Data from the International Body Project also showed that there were large differences in ideal body size *within* countries, with participants from sites of relatively low

socioeconomic status idealizing heavier body sizes than participants from sites of relatively higher socioeconomic status (Swami et al., 2010). This is also corroborated by other studies that have included participants from the same country but from sites differing in socioeconomic status (e.g., urban versus rural sites). These studies consistently report that there is an inverse relationship between socioeconomic status and ideal body size, with data coming from Asia (e.g., Swami & Tovée, 2005), Europe (Swami & Tovée, 2007), the South Pacific (Swami et al., 2007), and Africa (Tovée, Swami, Furnham, & Mangalparsad, 2006). In fact, moving from a site of low socioeconomic status to one of high socioeconomic status appears to shift body size ideals from relatively heavy to relatively thin (Nicolau et al., 2008; Tovée et al., 2006).

Explaining Cross-Cultural Differences and/or Similarities

In contrast to evolutionary psychological explanations of beauty ideals, which emphasize the “naturalness” of those ideals based on presumed cross-cultural similarity, sociocultural theory seeks to understand the ways in which cultural milieus and structures propagate and shape beauty ideals, as well as the way in which those ideals are transmitted to individuals via various agents (Levine & Smolak, 2010; Thompson, Heinberg, Altabe, & Smolak, 1999). From this perspective, beauty ideals can be viewed as cultural symbols that are constantly constructed, reconstructed, and negotiated within particular cultural or subcultural contexts (Anderson-Fye & Brewis, 2017; Backett-Milburn & McKie, 2001). Far from being immutable, beauty ideals are shaped and reshaped by a range of actors within particular contexts and, to the extent that those ideals prescribe unachievable ideals for most individuals, it will result in body- and self-disparagement, as individuals struggle to reconcile their actual selves with culturally-prescribed ideals of appearance (Becker, 2004; Ramati-Ziber, Shnabel, & Glick, 2020).

Westernization

Although a number of different agents transmit information about, and pressure to conform to, beauty ideals, much of the available research has focused on the role played by the mass media (Thompson et al., 1999). In Western Europe and North America, for

example, a shift toward homogenized beauty ideals is often said to have begun in the early part of the 20th century, which coincides with the proliferation of mass media that informed consumers about what was beautiful (Brumberg, 1998; Calogero et al., 2007). Drawing on this perspective, scholars have also implicated the reach of Western media in homogenizing beauty ideals across the world. In the 1980s, for example, Nasser (1986) noted differences in rates of disordered eating between Arab women in the UK and Egypt, and attributed the difference to levels of Westernization. More specifically, she identified Western media as an important source of influence for beauty ideals and wrote that, “new concepts of beauty and femininity... transmitted through television programmes” helped to explain the rising prevalence of disordered eating in non-Western sites like Egypt.

Other scholars have followed this lead in highlighting the role of Western media in shaping beauty ideals in non-Western settings. For example, Becker’s (2004) seminal work in Fiji examined how the introduction of Western television programs reshaped relationships with the self, such that individuals increasingly engaged in a “process of competitively positioning oneself through the savvy manipulation of cultural symbols”, such as through the consumption of material goods, adorning the body to demonstrate cultural capital, or attempts to reconfigure the body. As one example, she described how Fijian women who bought into “Western styles of appearance and the ethos of work on the body” increasingly viewed thinness as a means of obtaining the consumerist lifestyle they newly desired. In her view, the illusion that the self could be “reshaped and remade” invariably led to negative body image and disordered eating, as individuals struggled to achieve prescriptive beauty ideals (Becker, 2004).

Of course, Western media do not merely propagate beauty ideals, which are internalized by individuals in non-Western regions of the world. Rather, Western media also present a concoction of values that go beyond beauty ideals alone. For example, such media typically also idealize youthfulness, promote a notion that the body is inherently malleable, emphasize that body-work is both normal and required, and pathologizes a reluctance to work on one’s appearance (Becker, 2004; Levine & Smolak, 2006, 2010). In

sites that have seen an influx of Westernized media, the adoption of these hitherto alien values made it more likely that new beauty ideals – and indeed the veneration of beauty in and of itself – would find new audiences (Anderson-Fye & Becker, 2004). Beyond ethnographic work, cross-sectional evidence also supports a link between exposure to Western media and beauty ideals: in the International Body Project, for example, greater exposure to Western media was significantly associated with a preference for thin female figures (Swami et al., 2010).

Despite this evidence, there are limits to the Westernization argument. For one thing, more recent research is increasingly problematizing the view that there is a strong relationship between media consumption and adherence to beauty ideals (Ferguson, 2013). Instead, it may be that the deleterious effects of media exposure are strongest for individuals who have pre-existing body image issues or personality profiles (e.g., higher Neuroticism) that place them at risk for internalizing beauty messages. More generally, the traditional narrative in which Western media are treated as a homogenous, monolithic, and all-powerful force – what is sometimes referred to as the hypodermic effects model (Gill, 2012) – unfairly treats consumers as isolated and passive. In fact, consumers are often active, engaged, and critical media users who frequently critique and deconstruct beauty ideals that are propagated in mass media. Indeed, the proliferation of Western media also opened up new spaces to critique and challenge beauty ideals and practices in a manner that was far more complex than the traditional narrative suggested.

Indeed, this was the conclusion of Anderson-Fye's (2004) longitudinal ethnographic work in Belize, a nation where the impact of Westernization has been marked. Rather than finding evidence for a thin ideal in this context, Anderson-Fye reported that having a "Coca-Cola" body shape was more important than attaining thinness, and that this was coupled with a rejection of Western body ideals. Anderson-Fye (2004, 2011) proposed that this was an example of how values particular to a culture or context can resist Westernized images of beauty. In a similar vein, it is possible that some values native to non-Western cultures engender a thin ideal, irrespective of Western influence. For example, it has been suggested

that the Confucian belief that “real” women attend to, and work on, the body and self-restrict food intake may engender a thin ideal in some East Asian nations (Jackson, Keel, & Lee, 2006). Similarly, religious fasting may place a similar pressure toward a thin ideal among some Muslim populations (Edman & Yates, 2004). In short, although many theorists have relied on Westernization as an explanation for differences in body size, it may not be sufficient to fully account for cross-cultural differences in beauty ideals.

Socioeconomic Development

One of the difficulties with the Westernization argument is that it is often difficult to disentangle the specific effects of Westernized media from those of socioeconomic development and urbanization (Anderson-Fye & Brewis, 2017). That is, given that the influx of Western media typically occurs during periods of rapid socioeconomic development, it is quite possible that there are co-occurring factors that shape the propagation of new beauty ideals. For example, Gordon (2001) pointed to the example of rapid socioeconomic development in Japan in the second half of the 20th century, which (in tandem with Western influences) led to a myriad of cultural changes, including greater individualism, consumerism, and changing roles for women. These changes, Gordon (2001) argued, played a role in reshaping existing beauty ideals and shaping new ideals in Japan, particularly among high-income women in urban areas. A similar process was observed in Malaysia, where the introduction of Western media occurred alongside rapid socioeconomic development, industrialization, and urbanization, which damaged a sense of national identity and allowed easier assimilation of new beauty ideals (Swami, 2015).

One way in which socioeconomic development may impact beauty ideals is by altering the symbolic value of the body. Much of this literature has focused on body size ideals, where it argued that the symbolic and cultural value of body fat changes as a society develops (Brown & Konner, 1987; Sobal & Stunkard, 1989). More specifically, in contexts of low socioeconomic status, where the availability of resources may be uncertain or insecure, individuals are thought to idealize heavier individuals, as fatness would be associated with access to resources (Fox, Feng, & Asal, 2019). In these contexts of low socioeconomic

status, it is also possible that thinness is associated with perceptions of ill-health (Tovée et al., 2006) and poorer parenting capabilities (Powdermaker, 1960). In contexts of high socioeconomic status, by contrast, thinness attains cultural and material value as a symbol of wealth and higher status, whereas being fat comes to be associated with relatively lower social and economic status.

The suggested role for resource security is supported by the studies – reviewed above – indicating large difference in body size ideals between within-country sites differing in socioeconomic status, rather than across countries. In addition, experimental studies have shown that proprioceptive hunger impacts on men's body size (Nelson & Morrison, 2005) and breast size ideals (Swami & Tovée, 2013) in the directions predicted by the resource security hypothesis. That is, within high socioeconomic sites, hungrier men show a preference for heavier body sizes and larger breasts than do more satiated men. Other studies, drawing on the Environmental Security Hypothesis (Pettijohn & Tesser, 1999, 2003) have similarly shown that, under uncertain or threatening socioeconomic conditions, individuals will idealize more mature physical characteristics, including heavier body sizes, because mature physical characteristics are thought to signal greater ability to handle threatening conditions (Nelson, Pettijohn, & Galak, 2007). Supporting evidence for this perspective comes from archival data showing a greater idealization of mature physical characteristics during periods of socioeconomic hardship in the United States (e.g., Pettijohn & Jungeberg, 2004; Pettijohn & Tesser, 1999) and from experimental work showing that men experiencing psychological stress show a preference for a heavier female body size than control participants (Swami & Tovée, 2012).

Beyond resource security, socioeconomic development also brings important changes in gender roles. Thus, among urban women in the developing world, economic prosperity brings competing demands in terms of pressure for career accomplishment and work on the body (Ramati-Ziber et al., 2020). In particular, in urban areas, the attainment of prescriptive beauty ideals may come to symbolize modernity, personal development, and upward social mobility (Anderson-Fye, 2011; Anderson-Fye & Becker, 2004). For men, too,

changing gender roles may bring greater pressure to reassert masculinity through increased muscularity (Swami & Voracek, 2013). By contrast, the relative absence of gender role conflict in rural areas may help explain the relative lack of pressure to attain beauty ideals in those contexts (Swami, 2015). Because of these multiple effects and pathways, however, untangling the specific effects of modernization may be difficult; or, to put it differently, modernization alone may not be sufficient to fully account for cross-cultural differences or similarities in beauty ideals (Anderson-Fye & Brewis, 2017).

Conclusion: The Politics of Beauty Ideals Across Cultures

Although explanations based on sociocultural theory have been useful in helping scholars better understand beauty ideals across cultures, a limitation of the theory is that does not seek to explain the function of those beauty ideals (Smolak & Murnen, 2007). In contrast, feminist scholars have emphasized the ways in which bodily experiences are shaped by patriarchal structures, particularly (though not limited to) in societies experiencing changes in gender role orientation and where women strive for greater equality (Bordo, 1993; Wolf, 1990). From this perspective, beauty ideals can be described as originating from oppressive beliefs and attitudes directed at women in male-dominated societies. For example, Dworkin (1974) highlighted the ways in which “masculine aesthetics” shift awareness away from women’s real competencies to superficial aspects associated with beauty and appearance. Beauty ideals, in this view, reduce women to the status of sex objects, causing them to feel that their bodies are inadequate and forcing them to engage in practices that leave them feeling inauthentic if they do not live up to the idealized image of femininity. Beauty ideals, then, serve a very precise function: they act as a form of oppression against women, allowing patriarchal societies to denigrate and impede women’s liberation and gender equality (Bordo, 1993, Wolf, 1990) – a service that was performed in the Western world in the early part of the 20th century and that is now being repeated across the developing world.

Some feminist scholars have extended this feminist critique to include beauty ideals aimed at men. Bartky (1990), for example, has argued that what she calls the “fashion-

beauty complex” is responsible for the normative discontent experienced by women and increasingly men in relation to their bodies. The fashion-beauty complex, she argues, represents the corporate interests involved in the fashion and beauty industries, who propagate and maintain unrealistic beauty ideals in order to engender profit-deriving insecurity among populations the world over. By continually depreciating women’s and men’s bodies by displaying images of supposed ideals, the fashion-beauty complex ensures that women and men feel their bodies to be deficient, requiring “heroic measures” to rectify that deficiencies. Of course, the best way to rectify those ‘deficiencies’ is to seek refuge in the products offered by the fashion-beauty complex, so ensuring large fortunes for transnational corporations and industries.

While it may be difficult to envision a future in which the importance of beauty ideals is minimized, even eliminated altogether, we should not forget the ways in which beauty ideals and practices were challenged by thousands of women and men in the 1970s, who strived for women’s liberation. Likewise, in an increasingly globalized world, opportunities for connecting body-positive movements and challenging prescriptive beauty ideals becomes that much easier. When Protein World’s “beach body ready” reached New York in the summer of 2015, many women there took inspiration from what they had seen happening in the UK to deface or subvert the adverts (Sweeney, 2015). This is just one small example, but it does point to greater awareness of the detrimental effects of beauty ideals and points to a future in which we are no longer judged solely on our appearance, but on our real competencies

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