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BEAUTY AND INEQUALITY

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A beautiful body opens doors in almost any society, but what constitutes a beautiful face is a matter of opinion...and racial preference

When psychologist Edward Thorndike coined the term 'halo effect' in 1920, he had done so following a study of army commanders' evaluation of their soldiers' physical qualities and personal qualities, including leadership. Soldiers with better physiques were rated higher for leadership, loyalty, and dependability. In modern day context, research has repeatedly shown that more attractive people tend to make more money.

In a study of five European countries - France, Italy, the Netherlands, Poland and the U.K. – **Giselinde Kuipers**, Professor of cultural sociology at the University of Amsterdam, explained how beauty standards support and reinforce social inequalities. Kuipers says there are three distinct mechanisms by which beauty standards favour those who win the genetic lottery: aesthetic capital, cultural capital, and the power of classification.

Standards of bodily and facial beauty

Speaking at a recent SMU-SOSS seminar, "*Beauty and Inequality: Beauty Standards and Social Divides in Five European Countries*", Kuipers describes aesthetic beauty as possessing a desirable body.

Respondents were asked to rate pictures of male and female bodies in three categorisations. For women: confident femininity, objectified slenderness, "real women have curves"; for men: tasteful masculinity, strong masculinity, proper manhood.

“By and large, women should be slender, [have an] hourglass figure, and are relatively svelte,” she revealed. “Women who are too thin or large are rated less attractive. The same thing works for the men. For men, being too muscular can be a bad thing, as are being too skinny or too fat.

“These conclusions are usually bad for people who are outside of the standards. There is more agreement [on what is beautiful] for women than there is for men, and therefore beauty standards are more restrictive for women. Therefore, there is more variations in the judgement of male bodies than there are for female bodies.”

She concludes regarding aesthetic capital: “For aesthetic capital to work [there needs to be] a certain degree of consensus. We found this consensus for bodies but not faces.”

How a face is judged is related to cultural capital: “What cultural capital means is people of different tastes, and these tastes have different values. Some tastes are specific to people who are educated or have elite positions, and if you display these tastes you communicate to others that you understand how things work in the elite community.”

Kuipers’s research found that people living in large cities and who are more highly educated tend to favour female faces of fashion models over girl-next-door types. The same city dwellers also tended to like the androgynous look of male fashion models over clearly masculine men.

“People see very different things when they look at faces. It’s related to their social background.”

A race to the bottom

The third mechanism, the power of classification, underlines race and gender. Whereas women are judged harshly on aesthetic capital, men suffer under the power to classify, especially Asian men.

“Men are often judged by standards that are gender-normative: is he a real man?” Kuipers elaborates. “This mean the androgynous men were strongly penalised. It also means Asian men are penalised for traits that are considered feminine in Europe.”

In her studies, the image of Korean film star Bae Yong-joon was rated among the lowest for “being a real man”. Images of other Asian men also scored poorly on manliness.

“I didn’t expect this,” Kuipers says. “I asked about beauty and I got racism in a strong way. In this European notion beauty is this understanding of race. The concept of beauty as Europeans understand it has, at its heart, not just an understanding of gender but also race. It makes it easier to judge some racial traits as being less beautiful.

“Race and masculinity is the other thing. Asian men are less masculine. Black men are way too masculine. There’s also a masculinity for very fair men. Very pale blond men are viewed as less masculine because that’s the description for female fashion models.”

While the study was specific to five European countries, Kuipers believes the findings could be relevant to Asia.

“First of all, we see that the continental differences are unexpectedly small and possibly declining in Europe. Among younger people, the country effects are smaller.

“Instead, we see differences within countries are marked by cultural and aesthetic capital. Countries are becoming more fragmented within, and people in one country are becoming more similar with those in other countries.”