

SUMMARY

SURVIVAL OF THE PRETTIEST

NANCY ETCOFF



Summary of “Survival of The Prettiest” by Nancy Etcoff

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Learn why humans gravitate toward pretty people

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Introduction

I love both my cats equally. I really do. But there's no question that one of them is prettier than the other. With striking golden eyes and velvety black fur that glows almost indigo blue in the sunlight, there's something about her that makes you want to keep staring. (It doesn't hurt that she's a tuxedo cat with a solid black face perched above a pure white belly. She looks like she's ready for a masquerade at all times). And although I'm only inclined to stare at her more, gazing in wonder as I try to imagine how it's possible for any living thing to be so beautiful, I've noticed that she has a more exaggerated affect on others. People are more inclined to give her treats, for example, or try to get her attention (even though she's too aloof to engage with either). People are drawn to her, yearning to touch all that luxurious fluff and win her affection. And even though my other cat gets more than her fair share of love and attention, there's still a marked difference in the response generated by her more attractive sister.

This response illustrates two things that Nancy Etcoff already knows: one, that people are inexorably drawn to beauty. And secondly, the discrepancy between our treatment of things that are beautiful and things that are not is uniquely problematic. After all, if people are inclined to treat my cats differently because one is prettier than the other, how much worse is it for people? In fact, we already know that when it comes to people, our preference for beautiful things can lead to discrimination, low self-esteem, and bullying. And although we'd like to think we might have evolved beyond these shallow biases, Etcoff asserts that we haven't. And over the course of this summary, we're going to learn why.

The Science of Beauty

When we think about science, we tend to consider avenues like biology, anatomy, or physiology. We don't often consider such topics as the science of beauty and, as Etcoff acknowledges, as a general rule, the scientific community neglects this topic as well! Scientific texts which examine the study of beauty or physical attractiveness are almost non-existent and those which consider the relationship between our brains and our attraction to pretty things are even more rare. So, why is that? Why aren't we studying this more?

Etcoff posits that one reason might be our cultural perception. For example, she cites Naomi Wolf's seminal text *The Beauty Myth*, which conducts a critical feminist analysis of beauty. Wolf concludes that beauty is nothing more than a social construct established and perpetuated by the patriarchy and cosmetic corporations. And you don't have to look too far or too long to discover the effectiveness of this conspiracy, especially if you're a woman. The pressure to be attractive, to present yourself as a sexual object for men to ogle, and to engage with performative femininity is both overwhelming and constricting. It keeps us buying makeup and altering our appearances. It keeps us awash with insecurity. But although Wolf's feminist analysis is spot-on, it only acknowledges part of the problem.

In fact, Etcoff argues that to address the question of beauty through only one critical lens is to oversimplify the problem. Because we cannot focus exclusively on social constructions or modern perceptions; we must acknowledge that the concept of beauty originated in the human mind, and as such, is not a modern concept. Instead, it is part of an evolutionary journey that spans ten thousand years and therefore, must be studied through a lens which evaluates biology, psychology, and gender studies as well. So, as we attempt our holistic and interdisciplinary investigation, let's dive into the next chapter with the most important question: what is beauty, really? And how do we define it?

How do You Define Beauty?

The phrase “beauty is in the eye of the beholder” was pretty much created for this exact question. Because the simple explanation is: you can’t. There is no singular definition for beauty because it’s not a static concept and it doesn’t look the same to everybody. However, no matter how we define beauty, one thing remains universal: we know it when we see it.

Psychological studies like this famous one conducted by Judith Langlois confirm this theory. For example, in the context of Langlois’ study, adult participants were asked to examine a collection of hundreds of pictures and consider the faces of the people represented in them. They were then asked to rate the attractiveness of the faces they had seen. In the second stage of this experiment, she showed the same collection of photographs to a focus group of babies to see which faces they would gravitate towards. Without ever having met or been influenced by the adult participants, Langlois observed that the babies were drawn towards the same faces which had been preferred by the adults.

To further test this theory, she expanded her focus groups to incorporate different demographics. For example, she showed the same collection of faces to a group comprised exclusively of African Americans. Then to a group of Caucasians. Then to a group of Asian Americans. Although the participants varied, the results didn’t. Almost all of the participants rated the faces in the same ways. And after she conducted her experiment with the babies a second time, she noticed that the babies weren’t just gravitating towards people who resembled their parents-- they were selecting faces that looked nothing like their own mom and dad based purely on instinct.

Even though the babies couldn’t articulate their motives, two things were clear to Langlois: firstly, that our standards of beauty aren’t necessarily formed by our parents or even by people who look like us. And secondly, our understanding of what we find is attractive is primal, nonverbal, and innate. As a result, Langlois’ study concluded that we are born with an

ability to identify beauty, even if we never fully develop the capability to define it.

Beauty Can be a Survival Instinct

If you guessed from the title of this book that we might end up on this subject soon, you're right! So, how is beauty beneficial for survival? We can explain this by examining some of our basic human instincts. We know, for example, that humans are drawn to pursue food, shelter, and connections with others. But what you might not know is that these impulses are guided by the chemicals in our brains. Our four "happy chemicals"-- oxytocin, serotonin, dopamine, and endorphin-- each serve different functions when it comes to helping us survive.

Dopamine, the feel-good hormone, is released every time we do something that promotes our survival, whether that's finding food or engaging in a pleasurable activity. This is to motivate us to do it again. So, for example, when our early ancestors found food, they received a surge of dopamine to encourage them to keep finding food and stay alive. Similarly, oxytocin is released when we establish our place in the social pecking order and forge positive relationships with others. And the same is true with the relationship between mother and child.

For example, when a mother holds her newborn baby, her brain releases a spurt of oxytocin which encourages her to protect and nurture the small, fragile creature in her arms. So, that's how our biology influences our relationships, but how does that intersect with beauty? Etcoff argues that our physical appearance connects with those hormones, encouraging our parents to care for us because we're cute. For example, because babies are small and pink-cheeked and chubby, they radiate a sense of purity and innocence that motivates adults to protect them. And although we might have evolved to the heights of modern-day society, even if we don't recognize it, we're still in touch with our survival instincts. We know that babies can't be left on their own "in the wild," per se, so our desire to help our species survive kicks in.

The author observes that this has been observed in the animal kingdom as well. In fact, Austrian zoologist Konrad Lorenz discovered that there are certain universal features among mammals which translate as “cute” and motivate adults to care for babies. For example, his studies concluded that features such as a large head, a small face, big, round eyes, small ears, a short snout, chubby cheeks, soft skin, playful behavior, and a funny walk are endearing to us. It’s why we’re obsessed with puppies, kittens, and human babies. It’s what activates a mother dog or cat’s protective instincts in the same way that a human woman’s maternal instincts are triggered. And a 2013 study conducted by the Dutch publication Behavioural Processes confirmed that people feel more empathy towards babies and puppies than they do towards adult members of either species! This therefore proves that physical attraction aids our survival by motivating adults to care for babies.

However, beauty has another role in the animal kingdom as well: it preserves species by helping animals find mates. This is especially noticeable in birds because they stand out due to their bright plumage. The vibrant red coloring of male cardinals, for example, is what makes them attractive to females. And studies show that males who have brighter feathers, longer tails, and more intricately decorated tails have a better shot at finding love. Unsurprisingly, this indicates that cardinals who stand out by virtue of being “more attractive” are more compelling to prospective mates. And we already know that the same is true of humans. Undoubtedly, we’ve all watched as the attractive kids in high-school were repeatedly asked out on dates while their less glamorous counterparts felt ignored and looked over.

But this behavior has also been affirmed by studies which examine marriage rates of girls who attempt to marry immediately after leaving high-school. When girls pursue marriage in favor of pursuing a career or education, with their life’s qualifications reduced only to their marriageable potential, the deck is overwhelmingly stacked in favor of those who are physically attractive. In fact, pretty girls who marry young-- and without jobs or education-- often wind up marrying men with substantial incomes

and education! This just goes to show how heavily beauty influences our decision making when it comes to choosing a mate.

What Qualities Do We Find Beautiful?

Choosing your friends or partners based on their physical appearance is like looking at a box of cereal and saying, “I want that one!” simply because you like the design on the cover. In some cases, the cereal might blatantly advertise that it tastes terrible or that you won’t like its contents. But we often choose it anyway because it looks pretty. So, why do we do that? And what aspects of physical beauty compel us to say, “I want that one?” To answer this question, the author returns to Langlois’ study, which we discussed in the previous chapter. During the course of this study, Langlois noticed one common theme: everyone-- including the babies-- instinctively gravitated towards faces which were more symmetrical and which appeared softer and healthier.

This indicates that we assess a potential mate’s attractiveness by similar standards to those of early humans. For example, features like lush and healthy hair, spotless skin, and symmetrical face structure signal that this person is a robust and healthy specimen whose genetics would advance the survival of our species. And although it’s highly unlikely that that’s what we’re considering when we ask that cute guy out for drinks, the truth is that these factors are embedded in our subconscious. We’re drawn to people who appear healthy and attractive because, on some primal level, we know that they’re likely to survive; partnering with them will increase our chances of survival. It might be pretty unromantic to think about, but the author confirms that these are the physical attributes which typically draw us towards prospective mates.

The Benefits of Beauty

Now that we've discussed the biological benefits of beauty, what about its social benefits? Although we've already confirmed that beauty can enable us to connect with prospective mates and marry well, the benefits don't stop there. For example, has an attractive friend ever told you how she received a free drink at a bar or got out of paying for something? Or have you ever had a cute younger sibling who could get away with murder? Unsurprisingly, beauty engineers these social benefits as well. The author points out that this occurs because studies show that beautiful people are frequently perceived as being good. For example, psychologist Karen Dion spearheaded some of the world's first forays into the study of beauty and concluded that we're more likely to give pretty people the benefit of the doubt.

And as this pattern is consistently repeated in social interactions, attractiveness researchers have noticed something else about its impact on pretty people. As a result of getting special treatment all their lives, attractive people are more likely to be impatient than others! For example, one psychological study attempted to measure this through an experiment in which they interviewed attractive people and unattractive people separately. During the course of the experiment, they asked someone to repeatedly interrupt the interview so that the participant was kept waiting for a significant period of time. The purpose of their study was to measure how long it took participants to say something about the inconvenience. The results overwhelmingly showed that their pretty participants waited 3.3 minutes before speaking up while their less attractive counterparts waited for an average of 9 minutes. This proved their theory that attractive people are more entitled and more impatient as a result of consistently getting special treatment.

Final Summary

Beauty is in the eye of the beholder. We can't define it or identify a singular standard of beauty, but we know pretty when we see it. In fact, as Judith Langlois' research shows, our ability to identify beauty is something primal and innate; we know it from a young age, even without being able to express it. This means that beauty is more than just a social construct: it's an understanding that is hardwired deep in our brains as part of our evolutionary survival toolkit.

Physical attractiveness can help us survive, compel others to care for us, and find a prospective mate. Because of this, Etcoff asserts that our study of beauty cannot be confined to either a sociological or biological analysis. Instead, we must pursue a more holistic study, one which is interdisciplinary and inclusive, if we want to learn more about beauty and its impact on our society and daily life.



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