



External Appearance of a Person From a Sociological Viewpoint

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Abstract

In society, an individual's outer appearance is involved with many attitudes and meanings targeting that very same person. Beauty seems to be a prerogative since ancient times, while ugliness a mere disadvantage. Despite relativity in evaluations due to time and geography, certain firm convergences of opinion regarding good looks, also seem to be available. The Handling of the topic in this respect is a fairly new understanding in Sociology.

Key Words: Physical; Outer; Appearance; Good looks; Beautiful; Handsome

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INTRODUCTION

While Special Sociologies keep getting diversified; human face and body are becoming a subject of interest. Books are getting printed and dissertations are being prepared regarding the topic.

Columnist Aköz (1977, October 4) writes that while he took up this topic in his Sociology master thesis at *Bosphorous University* in early 1980s; many acquaintances reproached him for being marginal and eccentric. At the time macro topics like urbanization, emigration and so forth were associated with sociological studies.

He goes on as follows: *The body being re-shaped through the society was basically a theme of the*

anthropologists (as in the case of face-coloring techniques of primitive tribes). However; even though we thought we were the sole possessors of our bodies; within the social life, even our bodies were getting re-constructed. The organs were well-placed all right; but their meanings as well as the techniques applied to them had been in constant change throughout the times.

1. A SOCIAL ASPECT IS CERTAINLY THERE

In another essay Aköz (1997, December 4) approaches the topic again: *Many doctrines develop the idea of dedicating our valueless bodies to the service of high values. But capitalist societies advocate just the opposite view: "Love your body! Care for your body! Obtain more pleasure! Eat, drink, browse around! Keep away from pain!" In such societies a huge sector of body-maintenance had emerged, which targets especially the womenfolk¹.*

The funny thing is; people have always tried to find correlations between personality and appearance. In that respect; care for the appearance and placement of a high value on character does not fall wide apart, after all.

Jurists had been dealt with this correlation from the point of differentiating criminal types. *Theorists like Lombroso, Kretschmer, Sheldon carried out studies pointing to higher propensity of certain physical types of crime and deviance. They even came up with experimental support. However they made methodical errors (selecting criminals from institutions instead of a societal sample; the non-systematical design of so-called control groups;*

¹ *Bertrand Russell said that usually women are prone to love men for their character strength while men tend to love women for their external appearance. Indeed; maybe because they are well-aware of this fact; women attribute more importance to their physical entities. They constitute 90 % of the patients of plastic surgery (Myers, 1994, p.299).*

categorizing border-types to the meant category, due to bias etc.) (highlighted from Horton & Hunt, 1980).

It should be given that the above-mentioned theories do continue to affect people's opinions. Many law-books, if only under the topic of the history of theories, do allude to physical traits like an asymmetrical face, a flat and tapering forehead (*un front fuyant*), ears sticking out from the head and the presence of Darwin tubercle [a cartilage noodle in the helix of the upper section of the auricle]. Related people are still regarded by suspicion by many circles.

2. PHYSICAL APPEARANCE AND CHARACTER TRAITS

“Criminal tendency” left aside; *some physiognomy experts attempt to depict personality traits from facial features and head structures, based on their own research techniques. Morphometry examines the shapes and measurements of face, body and hands. Kinesiology concentrates on gait, gesticulations and movements. Phonometry studies voice and kinds of laughter*² (Daco, 1961, pp.13-14).

[However] *reading the character from physical structure is mostly an occupation of popular newspapers and Sunday magazines. Social scientists regard the issue as being a shady business* (highlighted from Horton & Hunt 1980).

Nevertheless, totally knocking out such attempts would also probably be a far-reaching claim. Many ancient cultures provide support for such ideas. An old Chinese proverb says that a man whose navel does not move when he is laughing, is to be regarded with caution. Many authors depict their novel or short story characters in light of their physical attributes. Poet and thinker Necip Fazıl was using the phrase “a somewhat large nose, indicating appetite” in one of his writings. (A friend of mine, a teacher, said for that poet that his wrinkled face was like a map, the face of a really- thinking-man).

Movement, stature, tone of voice could be more important than anatomical structure in the sense that they at least provide cues revealing the present psychological state; provided they are natural and not affected. L.A. Vaught (1907, 1924), the author of a very old book in French says the following, in his prologue: *Not only human beings, but also dogs, horses and other animals read characters, all in their own manners. The dog*

² In Islamic culture silent smile is praised while loud laughter is scorned upon. I, personally, tend to attach a lot of importance to the voice, too, when I want to infer some findings about a stranger. It is interesting that a religious preacher's voice is very affective for me while listening to a Friday-sermon in a mosque. Sometimes the voice is full of pious elements and calls for confidence in an emphasized degree. Sometimes the voice sounds like being worldly and treacherous in essence, insinuating some hypocrisy for the part of his owner and depriving the context from its celestial ambiance altogether! Alas! S.Ç.

understands the mental state of his master by careful observation of the man's face. The child finds out the weak and strong sides of his parents thanks to the same method. Businessmen, lawyers, detectives do the same thing knowingly or unconsciously; while listening to people or investigating them.

3. ATTRIBUTED MEANINGS

Indeed; a mother firstly *observes* his son coming from exile of some sort. She tries to infer his suffering or comfortable life through his face and attitude, rather than his talk. In Sociology; similar interpretations and inferences are far more important in currents or schools of symbolic interactionism and ethnomethodology.

Numerous evidence shows that we value beauty and pleasantness. Our care of ourselves, our effort in following a new fashion, the increasing use of cosmetics all indicate the value of beauty. (Tevrüz, 1989, p.146)

Attractiveness is related to status. Handsome men and nice-looking women usually achieve vertical movement in society through privileged weddings, climbing on to higher social strata. (In this sense the Turkish saying “Let Allah bestows the luck of the ugly!” Is not justifiable, at all. Maybe in Turkish society beauty is valued much more than in western societies, and thereby its gains are underestimated).

In history, beauty did count a lot. *Ottomans believed that many virtues were displaced on the face.* In Turkish culture, “radiant-faced” (*nur yüzlü*) is a common metaphor. While being recruited to the palace-school (*Enderun*), appearance was a credential besides intelligence. The initial gathering (*Das Einsammeln*) of Christian boys destined for the Janissary corps was not arbitrary work, either. Those with fair light skin, broad foreheads and clever looks were picked up from among well-built Christian children. All along Ottoman times, selection to officer schools always stipulated having a convenient body-figure (*müsait endam*).

A research by M. Webster and J. Driskell dated 1983 reveals the perception of beauty and the attitudes associated with it. University students considered poorly educated and low salaried attractive people proficient in many fields. Other experiments confirm such results. Findings show that people agree with beautiful / handsome people more or even leave more space to them on pavements than others. (Thio, 1991)

I remember an old adventure movie maybe dating back to the first years of the colored motion pictures. A hick-like looking plain-clothed cop and a presentable-looking gangster under his custody are among passengers *in cognito*. The detective imparts the impression of traveling with a friend. The plane makes a forced landing in a Latin American forest. The gangster profits from the chaos and exchanges roles with his jailer. He destroys his security identity card and imposes the idea that he can not convince

anybody with that face of a churl, anyhow. The poor policeman captures the opportunity to approach a young woman on one occasion; explains the truth and implores her with the words “senorita, you must believe me!” but all in vain. The woman distances herself from the hand-cuffed man with a horrified and puzzled look on her face.

4. REPRESENTATIVE QUALITIES

All over the world; women take delight in resembling famous actors while men enjoy likeness to handsome actors. Patients have higher expectations from good-looking doctors and nurses. When a representing person on behalf of a social body or country is in question, outer appearance naturally comes into play in the selection process.

The emergence of plastic surgery dates back to World War II to heal wounded faces of soldiers. But the discipline has evolved somewhat differently along the course of its short history and nowadays it appears to be in the service of beautification, essentially.

Sociologists think that in developed societies socio-economical differences diminish; education levels get closer. In the end; it is personal traits and appearance which win the upper hand. Moreover the media continuously compels the idea of youth and beauty (Ataman, 1996). In other words, one wishes to be somewhat different, in the modern society.

In Middle Ages an ugly aristocrat could have preserved his self-confidence due to his blue blood and wouldn't have needed nice looks, as much. The variations in beauty and attractiveness based on times and places is thereby very interesting.



NOT: YILLAR ÖNCE YAYIMLANMIŞ BİR "BEETLE" (ÜLKEMİZDEKİ ADIYLA "HASBİ TEMBELER") EPİSODUNUN HAFİZADAN YENİDEN ÇİZİLMİŞ VERSİYONUDUR.

First Speech-Balloon — Just what is that?

Second Speech-Balloon — A sort of Calendar. When she begins to look good to you, that indicates we have stayed in the bivouac for too long!

Figure 1
Re-Creation From Memory by the Author, From A Beetle-Series Episode, Which Had Got Printed in a Turkish Newspaper Many Years Ago

5. ABSOLUTE OR RELATIVE CONSIDERATIONS?

On one hand; the prevailing dominant or main stream culture does impose its norms and values onto the auxiliary or sub-cultures. Late singer *Michael Jackson* obviously was not impressed by the slogan “black is beautiful”. Instead, he kept bleaching his face with all possible methods, all the time.

However; on the other hand; some relativity is always at play. Some nude tableaux indicate that the ideal type of female has changed a lot. In former times, somewhat fleshy beauties were in favor. Here; the discovery of antibiotics and the improvement of hygiene is also affective. Being thin at times was associated with sickness (and especially tuberculosis) or at least with being prone to fall victim to the rushing epidemics.

Even today a person with some tendency to get weighty has a hard time keeping certain measures and biological threats emerge. Everybody has his / her natural and healthy ideal weight, whatever it happens to be. A former female colleague of mine, a history teacher in a private school, used to be quite comfortable in this matter. She would nonchalantly say “let my waist be a bit thicker than others’, what of it?”

Columnist *Hiçyılmaz* (1997) takes up the issue in his humorous style: *Along with measures, the values of beauty had undergone changes. TV screens are bursting with size-34 or size-36 female bodies! But their feminine and fine-arts symbolism is a thing that we old houses (old chaps) have difficulty in grasping.*

Dichotomies like “civilized” or “uncivilized” shape esthetic values, accordingly. Oriental ways like white skin, roundedness, slowness, long hair and henna and kohl and eyeshades left their place to thin, energetic, wrapped-in-corsets, short-haired foreign beauty. Things are newly intruding into Turkish life like corsets, trousers, chairs and gramophones began shaping ways and means of posture, movement, amusement styles. But the Turkish body still has a hard time adapting to those new ways (Göle 1994).

Even at a given time and place the idea of being attractive could work in a relative manner. But in evaluation of beauty one can also talk about a consensus which does not undergo many shifts (paraphrased from Myers, 1994, with reference to other authors).

6. “EXPRESSIVE” POWER OF APPEARANCE

Besides “good looks”, originality and strength of expressions count a lot, too. Character-players embody this understanding best. One such Turkish actress was *Aliye Rona*.

With her cold looks, frowning eyebrows, hard features and angry stare; Rona created a special, dominating and

sovereign female type in the Turkish cinema (Gürkan, 1996).

A baby-faced killer surprises the public opinion. A citizen stepping into an official department would be amazed when he finds out that a high-level looking man is only a janitor.

My former Turkish teacher in junior high school, *Emin Bey*, once brought to classroom a picture of the famous poet, *Yahya Kemal Beyatlı*. Before showing it, he prepared the level of readiness of the class with the following wording: “*The looks of that great lyric poet do give a somewhat coarse impression. Do not go ahead and ask me how come this man wrote so many nice verses!*”.

Interestingly enough; my later Turkish Literature teacher in high school, *Şefik Bey*, would also utter similar things about the same poet: “*Sometimes admiration in absentia works better. I was disappointed when I first saw Yahya Kemal Beyatlı. First of all, his awful eating manners, by God! He would stain his shirt with food traces just like a child!*”.

Symbolic poet *Ahmed Haşim*'s ugly looks were notorious in the world of Turkish Literature. Maybe this is why he liked the night time and made eulogies of darkness and shadows in his symbolic verses.

Henry Miller, an admirer of *Fyodor Dostoyevski*, was not content with the face of the Russian literary giant. In his Book *Plexus* he mentions that once he goes to the shop-window of the bookstore on the second avenue [in New York] and contemplates the picture of the man, thinking about his sources of inspiration: *What an ordinary face deprived of beauty! Such a mujik face would not stand out in a crowd. Miller says that he can read sorrow and stubbornness in this face, which gives the impression of having been just released out of the jail and keeps searching on this very face for the man of arts who had had created unprecedented novel-heroes, strong, real and mysterious.*

CONCLUSION

Such is the account of beauty. In general, It does affect people, it should be given. Yet; as Myers (1994, p.299)

put it; *though researches verify beauty as a significant subject; wise persons do not care for it, knowing it is only skin deep. They do not judge a book by its cover.*

In human interaction; physical beauty is more affective in the beginning. As relations get prolonged, it may not be so affective any more (Tevrüz, 1989, p. 147).

In evaluating an individual, the real criteria should be his personality and talents and the beauty of his soul as wise old mystics would have put it, at the time. In slave markets of history beauty, body size, strength, solidity of teeth were important attributes. As civilizations expanded; inner appearance came to become more important than the outer ones; until eventually; modern times' media forces began to impose beauty and youth vigorously, once again!

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