

## **Appearance, happiness and success: ‘what is beautiful is good’**

In our beauty-obsessed world, where incessant dissatisfaction with appearance is considered to be ‘normal’, it can seem as though those with ‘good looks’ are the ones who have it all. But is it the case that being beautiful can get you further in life? Nicola Stock explores the human fascination with keeping up appearances and highlights the impact of attempting to meet modern unrealistic ideals of beauty.

Interest in appearance, along with the pressure to conform to elevated appearance standards, has never been greater. Advances in surgical and nonsurgical practices have allowed individuals to strive high above the norm, toward an ideal which is becoming increasingly extreme. Much of the drive for perfection comes from the belief that life satisfaction is synonymous with beauty. But does beauty really lead to happiness and success?

### **Appearance ideals throughout history**

The human fascination with physical appearance can be traced back thousands of years, demonstrated in mythology, fairy tales and historical anecdotes (Frith, 2012). From birth, people have an innate tendency to be attentive to faces, and many people enjoy the luxury of being able to speculate on the features, figures and clothing of others (Rumsey and Harcourt, 2005). Individuals are also preoccupied with their own appearance, often stopping to check their reflection in a mirror or shop window when the opportunity arises (Rumsey and Harcourt, 2005). In recent years, the appearance ‘ideals’ and practices which we are all exposed to have become more extreme and demanding. Researchers have documented that the pressure to conform to high appearance standards is now ‘unremitting’, and has escalated alarmingly during the last few decades (Thompson et al, 1999). As a consequence, appearance dissatisfaction among the general population is now considered to be ‘normal’ (Rodin et al, 1984). In the early 2000s, large-scale studies estimated that 61–82% of adult men and women had ‘significant’ appearance concerns (e.g. Harris and Carr, 2001; Lioffi, 2003). In 2016, these figures are now believed to be even higher.

### **Judgements and stereotypes**

Although standards of beauty vary to some degree across cultures, the judgements which are made on the basis of attractiveness are relatively universal. Pioneering research showed that people who are perceived to be attractive are typically considered to be more sociable and intelligent, and possess better mental health (Dion et al, 1972). The media fuels the belief that ‘what is beautiful is good’ by informing people, directly or implicitly, that beauty is synonymous with success, happiness, and fulfilling social and romantic relationships. Magazine features, TV makeover shows and airbrushed advertisements bring appearance flaws into sharp focus, and contribute to the idea that if only people invested in a few nips and tucks, or the latest lotions and potions, they could feel happier too (Rumsey and Harcourt, 2005). It should follow then, that those with ‘good looks’ would naturally go further in life; yet is that really the case?

### **Beauty ‘myths’**

Fortunately, research has gradually demonstrated that these assumptions exist largely in myth. Despite the evidence that physically attractive people may initially be viewed more positively by others, research has in fact found few reliable associations between attractiveness and ability, intelligence or success (Bull and Rumsey, 1988). Thus, while it is possible that beauty can open

doors, it takes a lot more than good looks to become successful. Similarly, research has shown that appearance is only central during the first 15–20 seconds of meeting someone new (Bull and Rumsey, 1988). After this, other characteristics, such as eye contact, warmth and conversational skill become far more important in making an impression. Studies have also addressed the myth that long-term relationships are based on mutual attractiveness, instead highlighting the relative importance of sharing interests and core values (Bull and Rumsey, 1988). Further, those who are considered beautiful are not necessarily any more satisfied with their appearance or happier than anyone else. When it comes to subjective perceptions of wellbeing, factors such as gratitude, kindness and optimism, as well as movement toward a meaningful goal, strong social relationships, spiritual engagement, physical activity and the use of strengths and virtues (Seligman, 2003), far outweigh the impact of outward beauty.

### **Visible difference**

For those whose appearance differs not just from the ideal, but also from the norm, additional challenges may become apparent. In the UK, over 1 million people are living with a ‘significant disfigurement to the face and/or the body’, occurring as a result of a congenital or acquired condition, such as a birth mark or burns scar (Partridge and Julian, 2008). While beauty is repeatedly associated with positive characteristics, an ‘ugly’ or altered appearance is typically paired with mental ill health, a lack of intelligence, social isolation and/or immorality (Goode et al, 2008). Although society has come a long way from the ‘freak shows’ of the 19th century, these implicit associations are still often illustrated by the typical ‘baddie’ in modern films and TV programmes (Rumsey and Harcourt, 2005). However, in contrast to these assumptions, research has demonstrated that the majority of people with a visible difference adjust well to the challenges associated with their condition, often reporting psychological wellbeing which is equal to, or better than, that of the general population (Rumsey and Harcourt, 2012). Further, these studies have shown that the size and severity of the condition has little bearing over the individual’s quality of life. In spite of, or perhaps because of the challenges these individuals face, reported levels of resilience and personal growth among those affected by appearance-altering conditions are high (Strauss, 2001).

### **Psychological investment**

Interestingly, for those with and without a visible condition, one of the key psychological variables affecting psychological adjustment is the value placed on appearance relative to other personal characteristics (Moss and Rosser, 2012). Findings suggest that those who worry about their appearance and invest more time into looking good are more likely to report poorer self-esteem and lower levels of overall happiness. Further, overinvestment in appearance is associated with unhealthy behaviours, such as disordered eating, excessive exercise, disproportionate use of cosmetics, risky consumption of surgical procedures (Grogan, 2007). A finding that is perhaps even more concerning is that investment in appearance-related interventions does not consistently lead to positive outcomes (Cash and Smolak, 2012). The view that both surgical and non-surgical cosmetic procedures can offer a ‘quick fix’ for psychological concerns has rapidly grown in popularity and acceptability (Rumsey and Harcourt, 2005). While some research has shown patients to be satisfied with the outcomes of their procedure immediately post-surgery, few studies have examined the long-term impact, to explore whether the benefits of the procedure are maintained over time (Rumsey and Harcourt, 2005). Management of the motivations for undergoing procedures, as well as patients’ expectations of the likely outcomes, is therefore crucial (Paraskeva, 2015).

### **Conclusion**

Throughout history, people have been interested in making the most of their looks. Today, progressively high appearance standards are becoming unattainable for all. Those who strive toward appearance ideals, believing that their lives will improve as a result, will likely experience emotional distress when they inevitably, and repeatedly, fall short. Rather than overinvesting in quick fixes to improve outward appearance, genuine happiness and success can be nurtured through ongoing investment in core values and strengths, and key relationships.

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### **Key points**

- People often associate beauty with success, happiness, and fulfilling social and romantic relationships
- Psychological and social factors have a far greater influence on subjective wellbeing than outward appearance
- People affected by appearance-altering conditions report high levels of psychological adjustment in spite of or because of the associated challenges
- Investment in appearance-related interventions is not a 'quick fix' for psychological concerns