

Ugly people need love too

More bad news for the facially challenged. A new study suggests that parents are more likely to neglect ugly children than they are attractive children.

Five aggressive eunuchs have surrounded me on a Mumbai backstreet. Smiles notwithstanding, they are all stunningly ugly creatures. One has Naomi Campbell's body and Charles Bronson's face. The tall

Worldview by

Guy P. Harrison guy@cfp.ky

one displays what must be the furriest unibrow ever cultivated by a mammal. Beautiful, brightly colored saris clash harshly against weathered and twisted faces. One of them reaches out and gently strokes my arm. Their faces are so alarming to me that I never even have time to be freaked by the fact that they are eunuchs. Unsure if they seek spare change or love, I panic and break through their phalanx to escape. Never before or since, have I experienced such ugly-induced horror.

Today, looking back on that bizarre encounter in India, I wonder how much of my negative reaction was justified defensiveness (eunuchs, or hijras, are well known in India for demanding cash from people) and how much of it was nothing more than an indefensible prejudice against ugliness. Admittedly, if the five of them had been beautiful women I might have hung around long enough to hear what they had to say.

Bias against the ugly may be the most common form of prejudice in all the world. I am sure people in any society with faces comparable with those eunuchs I met are burdened in job interviews and classrooms in ways that attractive people never are. Unfortunately, research continues to reveal just that. Facial attractiveness plays a significant role in employment, salary levels, schoolwork and even parenting.

Sadly, according to scientific studies, the bias begins early. Babies stare at photographs of people who are rated as attractive longer than they look at photographs of people who are rated as less attractive. A new study by Canadian researchers found that parents of attractive children (as rated by others) give more attention to their children than parents of less attractive children give to theirs. Less attractive children were allowed to roam off unsupervised in stores more often and were buckled in



LIFE IS NOT FAIR. People who are judged to be ugly by others face a more difficult path due to neglect and discrimination, according to research. *Photo: 20th Century Fox*

with seatbelts less often, the study found. Attractive children may get more attention from teachers in classrooms as well. In the adult world, good-looking people may earn 5 percent more than less-attractive people, according to a study of 11,000 subjects by British researchers.

What is beauty? Beauty is many things to many people. However, the one factor that seems to override all cultural biases is facial symmetry. Scientists have discovered that the more one half of a face matches the other, the more beautiful that face is rated by others. So there it is, if you want to be a model, bring home a top salary, or get your mommy to play with you more, you better hope your eyes are equidistant from the center of your nose and those eyebrow ridges better match.

Researchers believe this obsession with facial symmetry is rooted in an instinctual desire to assess the health of people as potential mates for producing offspring. An asymmetrical face can be the result of disease or inbreeding, therefore its owner may not be a good choice for a mate. Okay, maybe this worked well for us a few hundred thousands of years ago, but now we have medical records and conversation going for us. Beyond Hollywood, Paris runways and prehistory, a person's quality of life at work, in school or on the street should not have anything to

do with intricate measurements of eye and nose placement. The amount of parental affection and protection should never be influenced by a child's lip alignment and ear positions.

Several years ago a snake oil salesman visited the Cayman Islands to peddle a nonsense system of reading faces to evaluate people, not by their facial expressions, but by the actual structure of a person's face.

With a straight face, he claimed that one can determine a stranger's honesty, mental state, intelligence, work ethic, etc. simply by analyzing facial features such as foreheads, eyebrows and chins. Of course, these amazing claims were not backed up by any science. Nevertheless, some Caymanians and residents who attended his seminar came away convinced. The reason people found it so appealing, I believe, is that we all yearn for the power to glance into another's eyes and know instantly if they will help us or harm us. Unfortunately, life is not so simple. Often the beautiful ones are the demons who threaten us and the ugly ones are the angels among us. Like it or not, we must know something more than the dimensions of a person's cheek bones before we can make intelligent decisions about the quality of their character.

Perhaps we would all do well to accept that our initial assessments of beauty and ugliness are nothing more than shallow gut reactions based on the largely irrelevant conditions of our prehistoric past. Today it is foolish, dangerous and immoral to reject or accept trust, kindness, fairness and attention based on facial symmetry. It is a prejudice no less ignorant and evil than racism. Besides, no one has the right to define beauty. In reality, we are all ugly and we are all beautiful. It just depends on whose eye is doing the beholding. For example, I know that every supermodel on Earth would cringe at the sight of me approaching them in a dim and smoky nightclub armed with my best pickup line. But that's okay, because I know that there are at least five toothless eunuchs in Mumbai who think I'm quite handsome.

Guy P. Harrison's column appears every Wednesday in the Caymanian Compass.