

Beauty and the Greek: What the World Demands and What We Have to Offer

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Like it or not, looks matter. All the research shows that men and women perceived as physically attractive (according to popular social norms, not Platonic or other conceptions of beauty) have distinct advantage in school admissions, court verdicts, medical care, employment and promotion. Not only do they earn some 10% more than less attractive peers with the same amount of education, experience and height to weight ratio, but according to Dr. Nancy Etkoff's book, "The Survival of the Prettiest," they might have been showered with more mother love than their less "cute" siblings.

Viewing someone as good looking doesn't necessary mean one is sexually attracted to that person. But it does mean that one is more likely to see that person as intelligent, "good," competent, healthy and financially and socially successful. If the looker is a female, men see her as deserving of better treatment than other women, and when she asks for help, she's more likely to get it. For both sexes, attractiveness has been identified as the single most important factor in mate selection. Women, however, also place a heavy emphasis on a man's earning power.

But there is a ray of hope. You needn't look like Helen of Troy or Adonis to rise to the top in the business and professional worlds. You can even be as ugly as Socrates allegedly was, as long as you have his smarts. Harvard University data indicates that in these areas intelligence trumps beauty. But if you're beautiful and smart, the world is your oyster – unless you're a woman who is "too attractive" or overly display your charms. Then, according to an American Psychological Association study, you risk being deemed less competent and reliable than your less attractive coworkers. However, if you are "too fat" or "too plain," you aren't a desirable employee either. Today's woman, it seems, must be attrac-

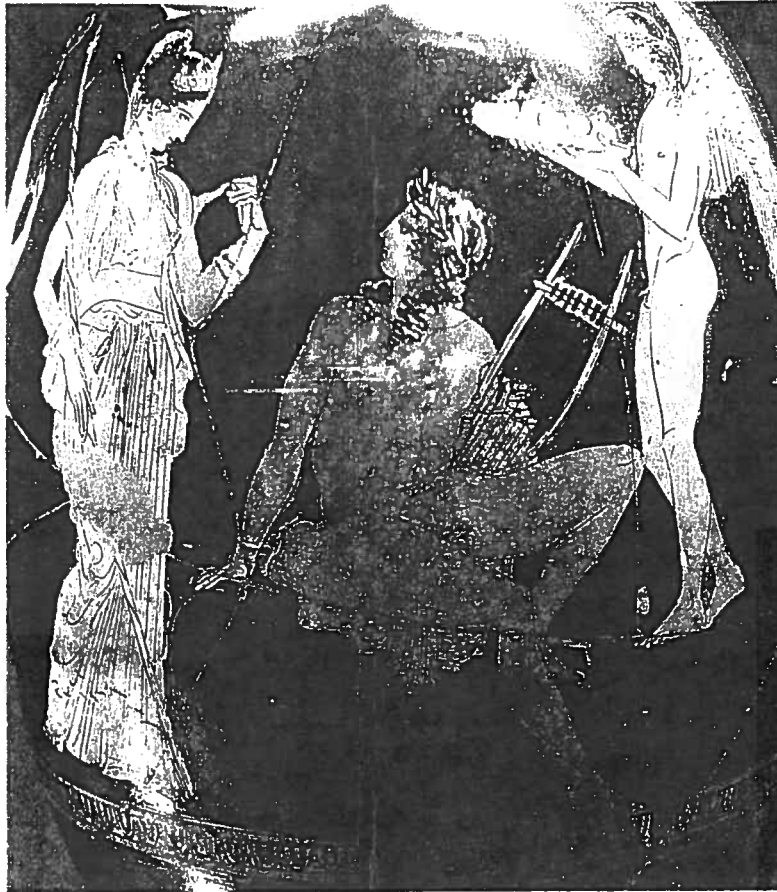
tive "enough" to be pleasurable to have around, but not "too" attractive lest she be seen as a bimbo who slept her way to the top.

In "The Beauty Bias: Discrimination and Social Power", Dr. Bonnie Berry describes "lookism" as one of the last "isms" – a source of moderate to severe inequality which remains inadequately addressed, perhaps because some find it politically incorrect or personally offensive. Beauty standards, Berry writes, are so "high, unrealistic and unrelenting" that they can create self-esteem problems even among super-models and other culturally designated "beautiful people."

For men, attractiveness typically involves a V-shaped muscular body and superior height. Indeed, men like Napoleon, Ghandi and many of our brilliant Greek ancestors and their notable descendants, short men (men under 5 '6") have left their mark on the world. However taller men are more likely to be hired, earn more money and attract more women. Controlling for age, family background, education and experience, one inch of height increases salary minimally \$600 a year for males. This "height premium" has been documented in thirty countries, especially in high status and managerial positions

All other factors equal, taller women are also more likely to be chosen for managerial and top level positions than women under 5' 3". Today petite women are more acceptable as mates, but decades ago I was "too short" not only for many American, but for several short Greek American, men too. Since I was 5' 2", they feared we'd have a short son who would be excluded from sports teams, rejected by women (even short ones) and subjected to other humiliations and obstacles they'd endured due to their height. Besides, they liked long legs.

Despite all the vitamins and ballet classes I took, nothing transformed my stocky peasant legs into long slim ones. But my tall Greek American girlfriends had an even harder time of it. Not only did they



Aphrodite and Adonis. Attic red-figure squat lekythos, ca. 410 BC. Louvre Museum. Ideas of outer beauty can wreak havoc on the soul.

tower over most Greek men, but they were “too tall” for many Americans too. As cross-cultural research indicates, most men prefer a woman shorter than themselves – unless, of course, she’s blonde, gorgeous or rich.

In “Fair Women, Dark Men,” Peter Frost describes a widespread preference for fair-haired, fair-skinned, dainty-nosed women, especially among the upwardly mobile. Today’s Internet and mass media have almost globalized this northern European standard of beauty which stigmatizes the vast majority of the women in the world who were not born looking like Cinderella. Popular (non-ethnic) American magazines and other media feature considerably higher

percentages of blondes than exist in the general population. While a hint of ethnicity may make one “exotic,” even the cover girls of popular Hispanic and African-American magazines tend to be darker versions of the all-American Barbie Doll; and in depictions of couples of color, the female is usually lighter-skinned than the male.

Statistics on how many Greek American women, or any group of women dye their hair blonde don’t exist. But I know few fair-haired women who darken their hair and I’ve yet to meet a woman from any ethnic group who surgically increased the size or shape of her nose to make it “more Greek” or “more African-American.” Studies of African-American women indi-

cate that following the 1960s, the white beauty image was dethroned and corn row and dreadlock hairstyles became more prevalent. Yet Chris Rock's new release, "Good Hair," documents the inordinate efforts women of color still make to straighten or otherwise make their hair look "more white." The only existing study of younger Hispanic women found that most endorsed Caucasian beauty standards; yet on a case to case basis they viewed Hispanic features as attractive too.

At a recent event a stranger rushed up to me waving a tattered photograph. Perhaps because she heard I was a psychologist, she felt free to confide in me:

"This is me, forty years ago. My Greek school students had just given me flowers for making Greek school; which most kids dreaded, something they looked forward to."

Then her eyes began to tear. "One reason I did all those extra things for my students was because I used to pretend they were my children. I knew I might never marry because I was too tall and had a megaliti miti (big nose) – crooked too. People told me to marry an American, because they're taller. But I wanted to marry my own kind.

"I never married. But last week when I got this picture I saw that my nose wasn't so big or awful and that I wasn't ugly either. I lamented that what I thought was true, wasn't true, and now I grieve for all the time and emotion spent hating my looks.

"All those hours wasted straightening my hair! Today women pay good money for curly hair like mine. But in my time, while wavy hair was okay, some people looked down on me because they thought my 'ringworm' 'Medusa' hair meant I was part Black."

Would Einstein had have discovered the theory of relativity if he was worried about his nose, hair and legs? Would Euripides have written as many plays if he spent hours counting calories, straightening his hair or trying not to get overly tan lest he look "too Greek"

or be mistaken for a Puerto Rican?

Lest this woman's pain seem like ancient history, just recently a teenage "American looking" Greek American client announced, "I'm ugly because I look Greek." This devastating message hadn't come from her family: it came from the wider culture.

I recall receiving the same message from two men with whom I felt in love. I'm certain they had other reasons for rejecting me, but the first charmer told me that since he was going into politics, a wife who looked "too Greek" like me would be disadvantageous. The second man truly cared for me. But he wanted a blonde, even a dyed or a "dumb" one. He didn't know why – he just had to have a blonde, regardless of her height.

Thank goodness I was encouraged to pursue goals other than the impossible quest for American beauty and for my grandmothers and other relatives who weren't preoccupied with their looks and were esteemed for qualities that had to be striven for, like honesty, loyalty and the mastery of certain skills.

Thank goodness also for the Sunday school teachers and presbyteras who not only taught about the beauty of the soul, but lived the life of the soul; the Greek school teachers who taught about courage and perseverance with so much passion; the American school teachers who taught about Jane Adams, Eleanor Roosevelt and other women who improved the world not because of their looks, but because of their love; and the role models provided by the many Greek-looking Greek American women who gave (and continue to give) so generously of their time and talents to the community with little thought of compensation. Thank goodness also for those men who found me desirable precisely because I "looked Greek" or who simply valued me for myself.

They've all helped me come to believe that among the different kinds of physical beauty in the world, Greek is beautiful too.