WHY I HATE BEAUTY

HOLLYWOOD PUBLICIST MICHAEL LEVINE SUFFERS FROM THE CONTRAST EFFECT. THE THEORY IS SIMPLE: MEN ARE BARRAGED WITH IMAGES OF EXTRAORDINARILY BEAUTIFUL AND UNOBTAINABLE WOMEN IN THE MEDIA, MAKING IT DIFFICULT FOR THEM TO DESIRE THE ORDINARILY BEAUTIFUL. HERE HE EXPLAINS WHY BEAUTY IS MAKING HIM SO MISERABLE. 

[38]
“IF THERE ARE A LARGE NUMBER OF DESIRABLE MEMBERS OF ONE’S OWN SEX
POETS RAVE ABOUT BEAUTY. BRAVE MEN HAVE STARTED WARS OVER BEAUTY. WOMEN THE WORLD OVER STRIVE FOR IT. SCHOLARS DEVOTE THEIR LIVES TO DECONSTRUCTING OUR IMPULSE TO OBTAIN IT. ORDINARY MORTALS ERECT TEMPLES TO BEAUTY. IN JUST ABOUT EVERY WAY IMAGINABLE, THE WORLD HONORS PHYSICAL BEAUTY. BUT I HATE BEAUTY.

I live in what is likely the beauty capital of the world and have the enviable fortune to work with some of the most beautiful women in it. With their smooth bodies and supple waists, these women are the very picture of youth and attractiveness. Not only are they exemplars of nature’s design for detonating desire in men, but they stir yearnings for companionship that date back to ancestral mating dances. Still, beauty is driving me nuts, and although I’m a successful red-blooded American male, divorced and available, it is beauty alone that is keeping me single and lonely.

It is scant solace that science is on my side. I seem to have a confirmed case of the contrast effect. It doesn’t make me any happier knowing it’s afflicting lots of others too.

As an author of books on marketing, I have long known about the contrast effect. It is a principle of perception whereby the differences between two things are exaggerated depending on the order in which those things are presented. If you lift a light object and then a heavy object, you will judge the second object heavier than if you had lifted it first or solo.

Psychologists Sara Gutierrez, Ph.D., and Douglas Kenrick, Ph.D., both of Arizona State University, demonstrated that the contrast effect operates powerfully in the sphere of person-to-person attraction as well. In a series of studies over the past two decades, they have shown that, more than any of us might suspect, judgments of attractiveness (of ourselves and of others) depend on the situation in which we find ourselves. For example, a woman of average attractiveness seems a lot less attractive than she actually is if a viewer has first seen a highly attractive woman. If a man is talking to a beautiful female at a cocktail party and is then joined by a less attractive one, the second woman will seem relatively unattractive.

The contrast principle also works in reverse. A woman of average attractiveness will seem more attractive than she is if she enters a room of unattractive women. In other words, context counts.

In their very first set of studies, which have been expanded and refined over the years to determine the exact circumstances under which the findings apply and their effects on both men and women, Gutierrez and Kenrick asked male college dormitory residents to rate the photo of a potential blind date. (The photos had been previously rated by other males to be of average attractiveness.) If the men were watching an episode of Charlie’s Angels when shown the photo, the blind date was rated less desirable than she was by males watching a different show. The initial impressions of romantic partners—women who were actually available to them and likely to be interested in them—were so adversely affected that the men didn’t even want to bother.

Since these studies, the researchers have found that the contrast effect influences not only our evaluations of strangers but also our views of our own mates. And it sways self-assessments of attractiveness too.

Most recently, Kenrick and Gutierrez discovered that women who are surrounded by other attractive women, whether in the flesh, in films or in photographs, rate themselves as less satisfied with their attractiveness—and less desirable as a marriage partner. “If there are a large number of desirable members of one’s own sex available, one may regard one’s own market value as lower,” the researchers reported in the Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin.

If you had to pick ground zero for the contrast effect, it would be Hollywood. To feed the film industry’s voracious appetite for attractive faces, it lures especially beautiful women from around the world. And for those who don’t arrive already at the pinnacle of perfection, whole industries exist here to render it attainable, to reshape faces and bodies to the prevailing standard of attractiveness.

There’s an extraordinarily high concentration of gorgeous females in Los Angeles, and courtesy of the usually balmy weather and lifestyle, they tend to be highly visible—and not just locally. The film and television industries project their images all over the world, not to mention all the supporting media dealing with celebrities and gossip that help keep them professionally viable.

As the head of a public relations agency, I work with these women day and night. You might expect that to make me feel good, as we
normally like being around attractive people. But my exposure to extreme beauty is ruining my capacity to love the ordinarily beautiful women of the real world, women who are more likely to meet my needs for deep connection and partnership of the soul.

The contrast effect doesn’t apply just to strangers men have yet to meet who might be most suitable for them. In ongoing studies, Gutierrez and Kenrick have found that it also affects men’s feelings about their current partner. Viewing pictures of attractive women weakens their commitment to their mates. Men rate themselves as being less in love with their partner after looking at Playboy centerfolds than they did before seeing the pictures of beautiful women.

This finding is all the more surprising because getting someone aroused normally boosts their attraction to their partner. But seeing beautiful models wiped out whatever effect the men might have experienced from being sexually aroused.

The strange thing is, being bombarded with visions of beautiful women (or for women, socially powerful men) doesn’t make us think our partners are less physically attractive. It doesn’t change our perception of our partner. Instead, by some sleight of mind, it distorts our idea of the pool of possibilities.

These images make us think there’s a huge field of alternatives. It changes our estimate of the number of people who are available to us as potential mates. In changing our sense of the possibilities, it prods us to believe we could always do better, keeping us continually unsatisfied.

“The perception of the comparison pool is changed,” says Gutierrez. “In this context our partner doesn’t look so great.” Adds Kenrick: “You think, ‘Yes, my partner’s fine—but why do I have to settle for fine when there are just so many great people out there?’” All you have to do is turn on the TV or look at the covers of magazines in the supermarket checkout line to be convinced there are any number of incredibly beautiful women available.

Kenrick puts it in evolutionary perspective. Like us, he says, our ancestors were probably designed to make some estimation of the possible pool of alternatives and some estimation of their own worth relative to the possibilities.

The catch is they just didn’t see that many people, and certainly not many beautiful people. They lived in a little village of maybe 30. Even if you counted distant third cousins, our ancestors might have been exposed to a grand total of 500 people in their lifetime. And among those 500, some were old, some were young, but very few were very attractive.

Today anyone who turns on the TV or looks at a magazine can easily see 500 beautiful people in an hour, certainly in an evening. “My pool includes the people I see in my everyday life,” explains Kenrick. “I don’t consciously think that the people I see through movies, TV and magazines are artificial. Still, seeing Juliette Binoche all the time registers in my brain.”

Our minds have not caught up. They haven’t evolved to correct for MTV. “Our research suggests that our brains don’t discount the women on the cover of Cosmo even when subjects know these women are models. Subjects judge an average attractive woman as less desirable as a date after just having seen models,” Kenrick says.

Part of the problem is we’re built to selectively remember the really beautiful. They stand out. “That’s what you’re drawn to,” says Kenrick. “It feels good on the brain.” And any stimulus that’s vivid becomes readily available to memory, encouraging you to overestimate the true frequency of beautiful women out there.

So the women men count as possibilities are not real possibilities for most of them. That leads to a lot of guys sitting at home alone with their fantasies of unobtainable supermodels, stuck in a secret, sorry state that makes them unable to access real love for real women. Or, as Kenrick finds, a lot of guys on college campuses whining, “There are no attractive women to date.” Under a constant barrage of media images of beautiful women, these guys have an expectation of attractiveness that is unusually high—and that makes the real people around them, in whom they might really be interested, seem lackluster, even if they are quite good-looking.

The idea that beauty could make so many men so miserable has acquired hard-nosed mathematical proof. In the world of abstract logic, marriage is looked on as a basic matching problem with statistical underpinnings in game theory. Logic says that everybody wants to do as well as they possibly can in selecting a life partner. And when people apply varied criteria for choosing a mate, everybody ends up with a partner with whom they are more or less satisfied. Not everybody gets his or her No. 1 choice, but everybody winds up reasonably content.

But the world has changed since mathematicians first tackled the matching of people with mates in the early 1960s. Films, television and magazines have not only given beauty a commanding presence in our lives but have also helped standardize our vision of attractiveness. Enter Guido Coldarelli, Ph.D., of the University of Rome, and Andrea Capocci, Ph.D., of the University of Fribourg in Switzerland. Once they introduced into their mating equations what they call the “Vogue factor”—a measure of the influence of beauty—they found that people become
dissatisfied with their sexual partners.

"When the concept of ‘most beautiful’ people in the world tends to be the same for everyone, it becomes more and more difficult to make more people happy," say the researchers. The same few beautiful people top everyone’s list of desired partners—clearly an impossibility—and no one comes close to being matched with any of their choices. So people become unhappy with their partner possibilities.

Alas, it’s not simply a theoretical issue. Sociologist Satoshi Kanazawa, Ph.D., finds that real-life consequences of the contrast effect exist, such as divorce. The contrast effect not only undermines marriages; it then keeps men single—and miserable.

Kanazawa, assistant professor of sociology at Indiana University of Pennsylvania, wondered: "If men found themselves being less attracted to their mates after being exposed to eight or 16 pictures in a half-hour experiment, what would be the effect if that happened day in, day out, for 20 years?" It immediately occurred to him that high school and college teachers would be prime candidates for a study; they are constantly surrounded by young women in their reproductive prime. The only other occupation he could think of where the overwhelming majority of people men come in contact with are young women, was Hollywood movie directors, as well as producers and actors—a group not known for their stable marriages. But there was not an available body of data on them like there was on teachers, from a general population survey.

What Kanazawa found was summed up in the title of his report published last year in Evolution and Human Behavior: "Teaching May Be Hazardous to Your Marriage." Men are generally less likely to be currently divorced or separated than women, and overall teachers are particularly unlikely to be divorced or separated. But being a male teacher or professor wiped out that advantage. And not just any male teacher is at risk. Male kindergarten and grade school teachers were contentedly monogamous. "There appears to be something about male teachers who come in daily contact with teenage women that increases the likelihood of being currently divorced or separated," Kanazawa says. He adds that these men remain unmarried because any adult women they might meet and date after their divorce would pale in comparison to the pretty young things constantly around them.

"Most real-life divorces happen because one or the other spouse is dissatisfied with their mate," says Kanazawa. "The contrast effect can explain why men might unconsciously become dissatisfied. They don’t know why they suddenly find their middle-aged wives not appealing anymore; their exposure to young women might be a reason."

It would be blissfully easy to paint a finger and claim that such infatuation with the young and the beautiful is the fault of the media and its barrage of nude bodies. But it would also be incorrect. They’re just giving us what we are naturally interested in.

All the evidence indicates that we are wired to respond to beauty. It’s more than a matter of mere aesthetics; beauty is nature’s shorthand for healthy and fertile, for reproductive capacity, a visible cue that a woman has the kind of prime partner potential that will bestow good genes on future generations. One of the prime elements of beauty, for example, is symmetry of body features. Research suggests that symmetrical people are physically and psychologically healthier than their less symmetrical counterparts.

If we’re now all reeling from a surfeit of images of attractiveness, well, it’s a lot like our dietary love affair with sugar. "We want it. We need it. And our ancestors didn’t have enough of it," observes Kenrick. "They were more concerned with starving. As a result, we have very hypersensitive detectors for it. And modern technology packages it and sends us doses that are way too large for our health."

There are, of course, beautiful women in other parts of the country. But L.A. is a mecca, attracting the most beautiful. Women don’t look like this anywhere else in the country, and certainly not in the quantity they do here.

L.A. is an adopted city for me, as it is for many. Born in New York, I wonder from time to time what shape my life would have taken if I hadn’t moved here in the 1970s. Whatever else, I would not have been saturated with the sight of so many beautiful women on a daily basis. But then I remember; these are the women whose images are broadcast all over the globe. While most people do not live in L.A., they visit it every day when they turn on the TV or go to the movies. It is safe to say that, to one degree or another, we all live in the shadow of the Hollywood sign.

READ MORE ABOUT IT:

THE MATING MIND: How Sexual Choice Shaped the Evolution of Human Nature
Geoffrey Miller (Doubleday 2000)

THE POWER OF BEAUTY
Nancy Friday
(HarperCollins 1996)

Michael Levine is head of Levine Communications in Los Angeles. Hara Estroff Marano is Psychology Today’s editor-at-large.