

UGLIOSIS: RESPONSE TO NEGATIVE LABELING OF PHYSICAL CHARACTERISTICS

Jack Bynum, Oklahoma State University

BACKGROUND

The labeling perspective of behavior etiology has received considerable attention from social scientists in the past decade. In the area of deviance the labeling explanation is sometimes called *social response theory*, concentrating on actors and their perceptions of each other. The labeling process by social groups can create and stimulate deviant behavior, "... by making rules whose infraction constitutes deviance and by applying those roles to particular people and labeling them as *outsiders*." (Becker 1963 9).

Goffman expanded on the labeling perspective and saw the burden of a negative social label as a *stigma* which redefines social relations.

While the stranger is present before us, evidence can arise of his possessing an attribute that makes him different from others in the category of persons available for him to be, and of a less desirable kind ... He is thus reduced in our mind from a whole and usual person to a tainted, discounted one.

Explicit in the successful labeling process in which a stigma is imputed to a person is the concept that he *accepts* the inferior status and role. Thus, if he perceives that he is indeed different in some negative way, his behavior will more likely be in harmony with the assigned role.

Characteristics that comprise and symbolize the spoiled identity vary by culture. Some central African tribes consider willowy young ladies to be least desirable for marriage. *Fat is beautiful* in their culture (Benedict 1946 28). In other parts of Africa there are societies that reject as unattractive the natural human ears and lips. The beauty norms of these groups include the painful stretching of lips and ear lobes into monstrous appendages which may appear grotesque to strangers. Many cultures around the world place high decorative value on massive tattooing and scarification of the face and body (Ottenberg 1960 192).

During one period of Roman history, a small or average size nose was considered a definite physical weakness, and a large nose was viewed as a real social advantage. Some observers sought to explain Cleopatra's

romantic successes with a few ancient drawings portraying the Nile Queen with a rather formidable proboscis. Finally, until the last two generations in China, large feet on women were treated with disdain by many upper-class families. The feet of their young girls were tightly bound and deformed to make them tiny. Such a lady need not be able to walk, since servants carried her where she needed to go.

These examples support the concept of cultural relativity as to physical attractiveness. They also point to humanity's general preoccupation and struggle to conform to those norms of his society that seek to standardize ideals of physical appearance. The primary manifest function of mass media is communication, but latent functions of magazines, motion pictures and television include recreation, socialization, and some contributions toward cultural homogeneity. Americans seem generally biased in favor of certain idealized physical forms and styles for humans. An island aboriginee with teeth filed to sharp points, a bone piercing the nose, and animal fat smeared on the body might seem attractive to tribe-fellows, but to European taste, and could fit well only in a picture in the *National Geographic* magazine.

I propose that the mass media are functionally successful in defining, shaping, reinforcing, and modifying our concepts of physical attractiveness. This includes not only the positive socialization regarding what is physically attractive and desirable among us, but the negative socialization that emerges from constant confrontation with so-called *physical defects*.

An illustration of this dual socialization regarding physical appearance is the contribution that Hollywood *Sweater Girls* of the 1940's made to the American bosom-worship cult. Older movie buffs may recall the early impact of the movie idol, Clark Gable when he was a young and well-built actor. In 1935, the script for one of Gable's films called for him to remove his shirt in order to display his muscular physique. When the actor removed his shirt, he was not wearing an undershirt. The story persists that when women took appreciative notice of their idol, the American

men also took notice, and acted. It is said that in a matter of weeks there was a slump in the sale of men's undershirts, because for a while, men simply stopped buying them. Many insist that the reason for this is that people equated physical attractiveness and masculinity with the movie idol who evidently did not wear undershirts.

UGLIOSIS DEFINED

At this point I will coin a new word: *Ugliosis* is formed from root word, *ugly*, denoting negative appraisal of physical appearance based on common cultural definitions, joined with the suffix, *osis*, which indicates an emotional malady or mental attitude. Therefore, *ugliosis* is defined as a condition of maladjustment in which the victim suffers feelings of inferiority and inadequacy due to perceived physical unattractiveness. Ugliosis is a direct application of labeling theory. It combines input from the social and personal elements in the actor's milieu that combine to define and impute to him/her the stigma of negative physical characteristics or appearance.

Ugliosis is sweeping the nation today, with the commercial mass media functioning as the carrier. With so much of magazine, newspaper, billboard and television network advertizing dominated by the manufacturers of beauty aids, it appears that there is a great commercial campaign to convince Americans that they are ugly. We are besieged and belittled unremittingly by advertizing which repeats that success in business, social life, and sex appeal can all be equated with how you look, and — YOU ARE UGLY! The impact and success of this mass socialization is attested by the fact that two billion dollars was spent on cosmetics in the United States in 1967. Annually, more money is spent on cosmetics than is spent on health insurance. Of all grocery store sales, 10 percent is for beauty aids, and 75 percent of all drug store sales are for merchandise intended to reduce the ugliness of the patrons. Virino (1968 31) reports on an endless proliferation of creams, oils, ointments, and solutions: special formulas for the face, fingers, and feet — to make us softer, firmer, curlier, straighter, thinner, fatter, fuller, flatter, broader, narrower, darker, or lighter; to make us all smell and taste better; and more masculine or more feminine.

Men have long used elevator shoes to look taller. Entire clothing stores cater to the needs of tall women patrons to create a *petite* image. Plastic and cosmetic surgery are becoming more common for straightening noses, strengthening chins, and lifting sagging faces. Strange paradoxes have emerged in our rush for corrected and glamorized appearance. Many a healthy tooth has been extracted for the sake of an improved smile, and the truly concerned person can have moles removed and thereafter pay up to ten dollars for an artificial mole to be glued on as a "beauty spot." Well over half of the United States population is already wearing something false, such as hair, teeth, lashes, and padded clothing. The proportion is steadily rising. The motive behind this phenomenon is succinctly stated by the operator of a beauty parlor, who reported that her entire business was built on her customers' fear of advancing age and ugliness:

To tell the truth, I would have to close my doors if my customers could accept themselves as they really are. Many of them are scared to death of showing a gray hair or a wrinkle. They want to look eighteen. (Bynum 1972)

SELF CONCEPT AND APPEARANCE

The careful observer of human behavior may see evidence everywhere supporting the hypothesis that the way we appear or think we appear, or fear that we appear to others, affects our social behavior. Many continue behaviors with no function other than the tragic response to negative cultural labeling. Hair is so closely identified with physical attractiveness that few balding men can accept gracefully the inroads of their condition. The struggle is demonstrated with a variety of techniques for parting the hair, and for treatments to conceal or postpone the inevitable. Just as inane is the tall woman who ruins her posture, developing round shoulders because she cannot ignore the cultural notion that women should be shorter than men. And the rather short man, in the personal misery of his dilemma, forgets that Napoleon was also undersize. They are dismayed by their shortness, and falsely reason that they must be inferior. The adverse comparison appears in the Old Testament (Numbers 13:33) when the Hebrew explorers viewed the giants in the new

land: "We were in our own sight as grasshoppers, and so we were in their sight." While a portion of stigma is imputed by others, a share of the spoiled identity is self-inflicted.

A further implication of the ugliosis concept may be made by considering the period of adolescence, when the budding adult experiences the strains of *identity crisis* (Erikson 1956 56). Comparing self with the illusory physical ideals of peer and reference groups, the youngster who falls short of the group norms for physical appearance suffers serious personal stress.

Of 93 teenage boys and 83 teenage girls extensively tested by psychologists regarding their physical characteristics and their attitudes about their own appearance, virtually all were worried about something (Stolz 1954 80). Boys were distressed by lack of height, eye glasses, fatness, poor physique, lack of muscular strength, unusual facial features, skin blemishes, and narrow shoulders. Girls were concerned about tallness, fatness, facial features, late development, skin blemishes, thinness, large limbs and eye glasses.

There is evidence that this adolescent anxiety over negative physical appearance may be transformed into antisocial behavior. Comparing 500 delinquent boys with 500 non-delinquent boys, the Gluecks (1950) concluded that while physical characteristics do not directly cause crime, negative characteristics may be socially treated in ways which encourage criminal behavior. The disdain and devaluation associated with the labeling

process of negatively perceived physical characteristics may stimulate a youth to retaliate against society.

Studies ... suggest that the biological factors and processes always interact with social phenomena to bring about such correlations as exist between them and crime and delinquency." (Short 1969 121)

Ugliosis as a response to negative labeling of physical characteristics may be perceived as not only an emotional and attitudinal effect based on cultural values, but as a possible stimulus to overt behavior. Some of this responsive behavior may be antisocial.

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