Is ‘Love at First Sight’ Based on Genetically Linked Perceptions of Beauty?

As the Human Genome project leads to an increasingly scientific-based perception of the world, numerous questions concerning the tie of mental capacities to genetics arise. For example, how much of what we as humans perceive as beauty is in actuality our genes speaking? Society emphasizes attractiveness: often those who receive the job offer, the raise in pay, or the perfect date are those who possess universally accepted standards of facial beauty. The extent to which this attractiveness lies in the mind and genetic makeup of the observer, therefore, becomes an important issue. In order to examine this question, qualities of both parties, the observer and the observed, must be carefully considered and the evidence for genetic and environmental roles must be set forth.

The link between genetics and human perception of attractiveness can be seen in numerous research projects. According to Chen, German, and Zaidel (1997), what society characterizes as subjective or impressionistic judgment of facial beauty actually is anchored in genetics and neurobiology. Studies reveal a natural tendency of the human to be attracted to certain aspects of symmetry and asymmetry. Infants as young as six months of age prefer pictures of attractive people to gaze upon as opposed to faces not previously identified as being beautiful (Chen et al. 1997). In addition, a reflection upon society’s past and present perception of beauty reveals a continuously evolving understanding of attractiveness. The heavier-set ‘attractive’ ladies and gentlemen of the past decades find fewer admirers in today’s society.
Instead, trim, athletic figures grace the covers of popular magazines. This evolution of the perception of beauty could be related to the corresponding evolution of society: widespread food availability negates the value of stores of energy. This concept corresponds with the idea that the role of attractiveness in mate selection is integral to the question of beauty and genetics. When considering someone to be attractive, adults are also frequently considering the value of the said person as a mate. Therefore, health and childbearing or rearing ability may be a subconscious value in the perception of beauty in humans. Miller (1998) claims that cues given by facial features indicate the underlying genetic quality of the individual; therefore, natural attraction drawn from these features indicates a reproductive survival instinct.

Yet, the impact of the environment upon a person’s understanding of beauty must also be included in this discussion. Location of individuals occupies a large component of mate choice; it also occupies a large component of the perception of beauty. The concepts of beauty set in place in childhood via parental influence, books, movies, and other media genera, and friends all influence the ultimate discernment of attraction. Furthermore, instantaneous attraction is only a portion of human mate selection: such aspects as extensive conversations, personality attractiveness and commonalities also factor into the equation.

The implications of understanding attraction to be genetically based are widespread. Do humans want to cite their genes as the reason for which other people are attractive? It seems that to purely scientifically base such an experience ruins the ‘romance’. Yet, in summation, it appears that whatever role genetics plays in the perception of beauty, it provides at least a general platform. ‘Love at first sight’, the traditional comment of instantaneous attraction on a variety of levels may have roots deep within the genetic code. However, as with other cognitive capacities, environment plays a key role in forming impressions of attractiveness; further
interaction forms concrete opinions of beauty. The precise extent to which either nature or nurture functions may never be known. Or perhaps we may never wish to know.
References
