



Why is rexy so sexy?

Kate Moss has been known to compliment her size-zero friends for looking so [ano]-rexy, and the modelling trade is blamed for the epidemic of eating disorders. But why is it that men find thinness so attractive? Women take no pleasure in submitting to a permanent starvation diet, and blaming models and the media just begs the question.

A clue can be found in the rape statistics – 25% of victims are under the age of sixteen. The male preference for youth (along with the universal ideal of virginity) seems

to be because the younger the girl the less the chance that she will already be pair-bonded or even pregnant. (It makes no sense, from a biological perspective, for a man to have sex with a pregnant woman, or to provide an heir for another man—hence the disobedience of Onan). Similarly, *the thinner the figure the less opportunity to conceal pregnancy*. The current fad for exposed midriffs – even in winter – is not so much a fashion statement, more a case of saying ‘look at my flat, toned stomach, I’m not pregnant.’ (Needless to say feminist authors see things differently: ‘the bare-midriff fashion functions as a post-feminist declaration of an “acceptable” commodification’ (Hall, 2006). Hmm...

This biological preference for thinness is then *amplified* by ferocious female intra-sex competition, hard-wired into the genotype. An additional amplifier is provided by a universal psychological mechanism called the peak shift effect (Ramachandran and Hirstein, 1999). If a rat is rewarded for discriminating a rectangle from a square, it will respond even more vigorously to a rectangle of exaggerated proportions. Human agents respond in a similar way, so thinness can run amok. The male preference for thinness (BMI) is more important, by a factor of twelve, than waist-to-hips ratio (WHR) and is also true for non-Western cultures such as Malaysia (Swami and Tovée, 2007).

This is not to deny the importance of youth and fertility, but it’s plausible that the male preference for thinness developed via a different mechanism. The low mean life expectancy and lean diet in the environment of evolutionary adaptation (EEA) would have meant that *most* women would have been fertile and slim for all their lives. Granted the advantage of pair-bonding as soon as possible after menarche, there are more certain signs of extreme youth than thinness – height, voice pitch, skin texture etc. The avoidance of females who were already pregnant, however, would require a distinctive cue.

The theory could be easily tested with a cross-cultural study of erotic art (Rubens' figures are amply fleshed, but they're not fat, and ancient (pregnant) fertility statues are more akin to a Harvest Festival than the stone-age equivalent of *Playboy*.) And if you think that thinness is a recent fad, then just take a look at an Elizabethan or Victorian corset. Women will undergo considerable suffering to display thinness.

Given that the pressure on girls to be thin has its origins in biological preferences there is no point blaming models and the media. But culture has its own protection against cruel nature – traditional dress codes. If girls were to rediscover modesty then the problem would decline. This is why Western women converting to Islam often say they find it an intensely *liberating* experience (the irony being that the original name for feminism was the 'women's liberation movement').

This kind of secondary-level evolutionary psychology (EP) hypothesis explains how women react to a male biological imperative. This is still EP, but mediated through culture. Culture may only be an amplifier rather than a primary cause, but in the human species secondary phenomena often take priority. This sort of theory is best described as non-reductive EP – you can't reduce every emotion and behavioural tendency to survival fitness as you don't need a teleological explanation for *reactive* emotions/behaviour. They're simply reactions, nothing more, and often strongly dysfunctional (excess dieting can trigger anorexia in subjects with the genetic predisposition (Guisinger, 2003).)

Sex during pregnancy

The motivation behind the display of thinness is *unconscious*. So overweight women are just as likely to display their bare midriffs, without realising they are effectively saying 'hands off, I'm pregnant'. Male discomfort with sexual relations with a woman carrying another man's child helps to explain why lesbians are often fatter than heterosexual females (what better way to avoid the unwanted attentions of men?) However there is considerable pressure on male homosexuals to exercise, due to the innate male preference for slim partners (Grogan *et al.*, 2006).

The screenplay for the film *Waitress* – in which a married pregnant woman has an illicit affair with her doctor throughout the term of her pregnancy – could only have been written by a woman (the late Adrienne Shelly); to male audiences the film is a 108-minute cringe.

