
The evolution of beauty

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Evolution is my faith; Darwin is my prophet. And evolution explains the power women hold over men. Males of the species *Homo sapiens sapiens* are in thrall to a phenomenon called neoteny. The word was coined a century or so ago, when naturalists discovered that a baby chimp's skeleton looked almost like a miniaturised version of adult human bones. Neoteny is the persistence of childlike characteristics into adulthood. Dogs are neotenous wolves; *Homo sapiens* is a neotenous ape. There seems no point in denying it.

And the human female is highly neotenous compared to the male. If you don't believe that, think of all the things that puberty strips from a male child. He keeps a child's lactose tolerance, but acquires an Adam's apple and becomes almost as hairy and muscular as his chimp and gorilla cousins.

But women retain many more youthful qualities into adulthood. Their voices don't break. The female of *Homo Sapiens sapiens* tends to have a delicate, elegant skull and a gracile, lightly-muscled, smoothly-padded frame. The skin is soft, mostly hairless and fine-grained. Even without perfume, a woman can smell as wholesome as bread straight from the oven or fruit from the tree. And many women I know have the same adaptability, enthusiasm, curiosity, glow and grace that they possessed as children.

The eyes tend to dominate a woman's face -- the so-called "baby look". There's a fellow called David Brin worth googling. He suggests that the "baby look" evolved to attract nurturing males. I'm going to indulge in a little speculative non-fiction now, as I explore how this female super-neoteny might have come about, -through a mechanism which shoves evolution into top gear.

Sometimes, Nature just doddles along in first. For example, a creature like "Old Fourlegs" the coelacanth can remain largely unaltered for millions of years. That's because it's well-adapted to its environment, and urgent selection pressure is lacking. Some civil servants can see out the last thirty years of their careers in precisely the same sort of tranquillity. Selection pressure is insufficient to trigger speciation.

Until recently, isolation was thought to be the main cause of speciation, as in a case where two populations were separated by a mountain range, or one of them was confined to an island. But recent work on birds and African cichlid fish has proved that speciation also occurs in an undivided population.

Even within a stable species, a rapidly changing form can result from a changing environment. It has been estimated that in a case where greater size guarantees survival, a creature the size of a mouse could have descendants as big as elephants in only a few thousand generations. And vice versa -- bantams are descended from dinosaurs. Competition between predator and prey also stimulates changes in appearance.

And here's where neoteny may come in. Darwin wrote about sexual selection, when animals choose mates on the basis of things which have nothing to do with survival. Adult traits are possibly imprinted on offspring and passed on genetically -- as ornaments. Evolutionary psychologist Geoffrey Miller came up with a theory that our large brains were an accident, the result of sexual selection by a species that was turned on by lots of head.

Runaway sexual selection can put evolution on a turbocharger within a given species. Let's take a couple of obvious examples. The peacock survives despite being slowed down by a dragging tail, and the stag bears the weight of encumbering antlers. This is because their female ancestors preferred to mate with a fellow who stood out from the crowd of importunate males who didn't measure up.

Female preference in mates was passed on through thousands of generations, becoming stronger as time went by. It selected for increasingly better-endowed males and the females who dig that kind of thing. The females remained drab as nuns; they had no need for such glorious adornments themselves.

But the law of diminishing returns will have to kick in sooner or later. Peacocks and stags will conceivably reach a point when the spectacular anatomy conjured up by their selfish genes becomes a liability. Survival will inevitably be threatened, as in the case of a bulldog whose face is so flat that he can't breathe properly any more, like an inbred Hapsburg monarch. The antlers will weigh too heavily; the gorgeous tail will attract predators.

Assuming that sexual selection prolonged the human female's youthful appearance into maturity, when did the crunch come for our female forebears? It may have been at a point in our remote history when both sexually mature females and immature specimens began to look equally youthful. The result must have been frequent child rape, which is an evolutionary dead end, apart from being highly repugnant.

I theorise that nature's answer to the problem might have been a new phase of runaway sexual selection that kept our female ancestors highly neotenous -- but left males in no doubt about sexual maturity. The new va-va-voom factor came from a modified body shape.

I refer to the parts men stare at -- the northern and southern hemispheres, anterior and posterior. Boudie and boobs certainly do the evolutionary trick, assisted by the hourglass effect they give to a woman's waist. So much so that a tiny waist can have the same provocative effect, even if the lady in question is not over endowed with what killjoy Calvinist bible punchers used to call "the Devil's Dumplings."

Face it, ladies, your corporeal endowments put you in the same category as the stag and the peacock. Strictly speaking, you don't actually need the wobbly bits for survival of the species. Your primate cousins are skinny, hairy, flat-chested chimpanzettes who breast feed healthy chimplings and swing through the trees without any need for a good sports bra. Neither do they have curvaceous hindquarters.

Research into the neotenous nature of women might bring new clues on how to understand and treat paedophilia, supposing that these speculations are near the mark. One might ask: Is the paedophile a perv with primitive hard-wired instincts who was left behind by the rush of sexual selection toward the hourglass silhouette? In *Lolita*, Nabokov's smooth-talking paedophile Humbert Humbert attempts to diagnose his own penchant for pubescent girls. He writes that when he was a child himself he loved a little girl called Annabel, and incarnated her in *Lolita* twenty-four years later.

I'm dubious about this tale; Humbert is not exactly a reliable narrator. It seems more likely to me that he was born a paedophile. He despises *Lolita's* sexually mature mother, his bride Charlotte: "she of the noble nipple and massive thigh". Yet he raves about his young prey's neotenous beauty in poetic terms.

Let me confess it -- I would hate it if women were not neotenous and waisted. Do peahens and hinds complain? I am content to worship feminine beauty, because evolution and runaway sexual selection have made me the way I am. Men understand their own urges vaguely. They allude to attractive women in youthful terms such as girls, dolls, chicks, abantwana.

But for his own safety, a wise modern man will never address the object of his intentions as "Babes", no matter how breathtakingly neotenous she may be.