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Why do gentlemen prefer blondes?

It is well known – although rarely acknowledged in polite company – that in Western cultures there exists a distinct esthetic/sexual preference among men for blondes over brunettes (Anstis S M, personal communication) (1,2). A similar preference for women of lighter than mean skin color is also seen in many non-Western cultures throughout the world (3). Indeed, in many countries, there is almost an obsessive preoccupation with ‘improving one’s complexion’ – an obsession to which the cosmetics industry has been quick to pander with innumerable useless skin products. In some of these cultures, women also show a similar – although not quite as marked – affinity for men of lighter skin.

Havelock Ellis (4) suggested that men prefer rotund features in women and that blonde hair emphasized the rotundity by blending in better with the body outline. Another view is that infants’ skin and hair color tends to be lighter and the preference for blonde women may simply reflect the fact that, in humans, neotinous features in females may be secondary sexual characteristics (5).

Here, I propose a third view that is not incompatible with the two theories described above, but has the added advantage of being consistent with more general biological theories of mate selection. Several authors have suggested that certain florid displays of secondary sexual characteristics – such as the peacock’s tail or the rooster’s bright-red wattles – may serve the purpose of ‘informing’ the female that the suitor is healthy and free of dermal parasites (6, 7). I suggest that being blonde, or light-skinned, serves a similar purpose. Every medical student knows that anemia (usually caused by intestinal parasites), cyanosis (a sign of heart disease), jaundice (liver disease) and skin infection are much easier to detect in fair-skinned individuals than in brunettes. This is true for both dermal and ocular (conjunctival) signs. Infestation with intestinal parasites (e.g. *Taenia*, *Ascaris*, *Enterobius*, and *Ancylostoma*, etc.) must have been very frequent in early agricultural settlements (8) and such infestation can produce severe anemia in the host. There must have been a considerable selection pressure for the early detection of anemia in a nubile young woman, since anemia can interfere substantially with fertility, pregnancy, and the birth of a healthy child. A similar, although smaller, preference for blonde males may be expected in women since a healthy non-anemic father is likely to be a better hunter and provider. (That fair skin may itself be an indicator of youth and hormonal status has been proposed by Symons (2), but he does not put forward the specific arguments concerning parasites or anemia being advocated here.)

A second, related reason for the preference might be that the absence of protection from ultraviolet radiation by melanin causes the skin of blondes to ‘age’ faster than brunettes and the dermal signs of aging (e.g. dark ‘age spots’ and wrinkles) are usually easier to detect. Since fertility in women declines rapidly with age, it has been suggested (2, 9) that aging men prefer very young women as sexual partners (Anstis, S M, personal communication). Again, I suggest that blondes might be preferred not only because the signs of aging occur earlier, but also because the signs are easier to detect in them.

Third, it also seems likely that certain external signs of sexual interest – such as social embarrassment and blushing – as well as sexual arousal (e.g. the ‘flush’ of orgasm) would be

difficult to detect in dark-skinned women; so that the likelihood that one's courtship gesture will be reciprocated and consummated can be predicted with greater confidence when courting blondes.

In summary, I suggest that gentlemen prefer blondes in order to enable them to detect the early signs of parasitic infestation and aging – both of which indirectly reduce fertility and offspring viability. Although originally intended as a satire on ad hoc sociobiological theories of human mate-selection, I soon came to realize that this idea is at least as viable as many other theories of mate choice that are currently in vogue.

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