

Exploring children's perceptions of beauty: A drawing study

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Inspired by Chan's (2006) study of children's perception of material possessions by asking children to draw a girl (or a boy) with or without a lot of material possessions, we conducted the current study by using a similar methodology. Altogether 115 Chinese children aged 8 to 12 were asked to draw what comes to their minds for two statements: "This is a good looking girl (boy)"; and, "This is a not-so-good looking girl (boy)". After drawing, children were personally interviewed to answer seven questions associating physical appearance with its social meaning and symbolic significance. The questions asked were as follows:

1. Tell me five words to describe each girl (or boy) you have drawn
2. How many friends does each girl (or boy) have?
3. Are these two girls (or boy) happy?
4. Which girl (or boy) would you want to be?
5. What clothes and accessories does each girl (or boy) own?
6. Which girl (or boy) is more popular?
7. What things does each girl (or boy) own?

Analysis of drawings indicated that there were significant difference in children's perception of someone who is good looking and someone who is not so good looking. A child described as good looking often had big eyes, wore many accessories including jewelries, necklaces, hair bands, high-heel shoes, and ties. A child described as not-so-good looking often had skin defects such as pimples, scars, birth marks and wrinkles as well as ugly teeth. The child often wore t-shirts and had patches on the clothing, suggesting frugality/poverty. Analysis of interviews found that children had a strong association of beauty, happiness, and popularity. A good looking child was happy, confident of her/himself, and enjoyed a large number of friends. A not-so-good looking child suffered from social rejection or even isolation. Nearly all the children interviewed expressed the wish to become the good looking child. There is evidence that children were able to appreciate the social meaning of beauty and the importance of material goods to enhance physical appearance. Based on the findings, we propose hypotheses about children's perception of physical attractiveness that can be further tested in a quantitative survey.