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Understanding Women's Beauty Standards Along with Social Constructs

The United States is known as the melting pot, a diverse country composed of immigrants from all over the world, but along with differences comes prejudice. Perhaps stemming from basic biological instinct, it is human nature to want to fit in and be one with the crowd, but with a society so diverse, change and separation proves inevitable. Most people would agree that holding the door open for others or letting a woman sit down before a man is common courtesy, but how did these notions come about? Social constructs are defined as “a social mechanism, phenomenon, or category created and developed by society; a perception of an individual, group, or idea that is ‘constructed’ through cultural or social practice” (Dictionary.com). It also must be true that, “...it would contravene no law of nature to try to get rid of it” (Boghossian). Not only do constructs avoid conflicting with visible facts, but they can blend into perceived fact after enough people support them. Despite beginning as fact-based inferences, they can quickly overgeneralize and prevent the expansion and diversification of society, especially concerning beauty standards for women.

When discussed, social constructs are often considered in a negative light, yet views of acceptable social conduct gives communities the ability to have orderly public areas. Without laws, the country would erupt into total chaos, but the nation and states alone cannot micromanage each individual's behavior every day. Therefore, social constructs strive to maintain a semblance of peace in the community. Give for example, athletics. If a player in a

NBA game picks up the ball with two hands and proceeds to run across the court holding the ball the entire time, he will be penalized for his actions despite inducing no physical or emotional harm to him or anyone else involved. Society has constructed a set of rules to govern the game of basketball and created penalties for breaking those rules. In another example, in social settings such as crowded public busses or trains, it is courteous to not take up multiple seats or be too loud. While these conventions aren't laws in these circumstances, they are constructed to benefit those involved. In this way, many social constructs are necessary and prove their derivation from the intention to uphold order in society.

While the concept seems like a reasonable idea, the controversy begins when these constructs threaten those who don't fit into their assigned roles or identities. Stereotypes and discrimination often breach the gap between guiding and constricting. The social construct that individuals should treat each other how they want to be treated can be overridden by those who prioritize the assumption that individuals of another race are inherently subordinate to themselves due to their past economic conditions or jobs of their ancestors. Young girls feel confident in their own bodies because they are able to do things just as well as boys until they are exposed to constructs emphasizing their need to focus more on looks and remember their place in society alongside men. These transformations happen more and more and their prevention is only brought about by awareness of how they came to be in the first place.

There are four levels on which social constructs can be expressed: the personal level, interpersonal level, societal level, and institutional level. At each level the same ideas are ingrained into citizen's minds but in different ways, to different degrees. The expanse of social constructs spread from individual biases to large corporations including everything else in between. While not all constructs are harmful, there are a growing number of labels being

applied to individuals which limits who a person can grow to become not by themselves, but by others. When kept behind closed doors, personal opinions concerning gender, sexuality, religion, and other topics are acceptable. When those ideas are expressed to others or groups of individuals is when differences emerge and people often feel marginalized or compartmentalized. No matter the level, the effects are still glaringly apparent and clearly reflected in rising violence, body modification, and self-esteem issues among women nationwide.

On a personal level, social constructs can influence both positive and negative behavior in an individual and their views. By observing the behavior of others, people of all ages create their own internal ideas of what will help them fit into a group and what is accepted in society. This is the creation of social constructs on the most individual level. These perceptions of accepted behavior may not be shared with peers or others, but their existence appears through actions toward oneself. A study done with women in the UK reveals that, “fifty percent of women wouldn’t leave their homes without some sort of mirror” (Grey). The constant need to assess their appearance displays a consciousness of what others see and the assumption that they must always look as polished as possible despite where they are or how they feel. Walking by a mirror and always assessing personal appearance is another form of this deadly behavior in which the individual decides if they are worthy of being seen, regardless of other factors such as health. Security discovered in physical appearance indicates that the individual, to some degree, has been conditioned to assume one of the more important aspects of themselves is their appearance. Although scarcely broadcast to the world, many other examples exist and continue to affect the individual and therefore society as indirect as it may seem.

The interpersonal expression of social constructs is conveyed through person-to-person conversation and interactions. Especially in teenage years when individuals aren't sure of their identity or place within society, it is very easy for others to influence their peers on what is acceptable or attractive. Young women continually strive to look like those they see in magazines or on television. Yet, when presented with a very eurocentric version of the United States and a gross underrepresentation of all other ethnic groups, it becomes a challenge to even accept their own natural body types. Likewise, young men are conditioned to desire physical prowess above academic achievement to reinforce their masculinity and appearance.

Above all, social media serves as the main medium concerning the reinforcement of social constructs. New platforms such as Instagram, Tumblr, Snapchat and Twitter allow for personal information to quickly spread to the public. The opinions and habits of the rich and famous are broadcast to the whole of society, allowing for easy comparisons for the average individual. It is not uncommon to see new lines of makeup produced by celebrities and endorsed by other celebrities, but what people often don't question are the effects of these new products on society as a whole. Kylie Jenner recently released a new lip kit to make lips appear fuller and therefore more attractive--her product sold out in the first ten minutes of being available for purchase (Bailey). There are hundreds of thousands of teenage girls and young adults who, despite not being children any longer, are still growing as individuals. As adolescents seek to discover themselves, they prove to be extremely impressionable.

The Pledge of Allegiance itself promises "...liberty and justice for all," but the truth in the vow is lost as national institutions, large corporations, and businesses continually promote unhealthy social constructs. These institutions utilize the common desire to imitate the rich and famous and as a result celebrities become props in advertisements of products and activities. This

ends up promoting the idea that all people should strive to look and act like the famous and significantly narrows what the image of the ideal human is. Other conflicts caused by institutions are laws passed by local governments regarding issues such as sex and gender. As publicized on NBC News, a growing controversy was recently fueled by the decision of the North Carolina government to require transgender individuals to use the bathrooms correlating to the gender specified on their birth certificate (Fieldstadt). Not only does this restrict freedoms promised by the Constitution, but also it sends the public a message of disdain and ignorance. Detrimental effects on individuals from neglect and denial of their identity has been proven time and time again by numerous studies yet highly respected institutions continue to pass laws regardless of their emotional or physical consequences.

The most prominent example of institutional social construct promotion lies in the extensive modeling industry. Modeling companies continue to pledge to increase diversity within the modeling industry but even in 2016, more than three-quarters of models are white (Pike). This exemplifies a very Eurocentric vision of America and beauty standards for all women. Women of all ages compare themselves to those whom society deem the most attractive and determine their success in emulating the appearance of others. For those of other ethnicities, this can lead to dissatisfaction with traits common to their specific ethnicity and a false perception of differences for flaws. Therefore, despite being subconscious, those who are not represented in fashion magazines, television shows, or on social media begin to believe their own selves lesser than those portrayed publicly.

Part of the appeal of social constructs is undoubtedly their efficiency. If each individual believes that their knowledge is true and doesn't take the extra time to question their statements, it becomes a much more streamlined assumption. In addition, people don't have to think for

themselves if they go along with what others assume, therefore strengthening the previously determined assumptions, fortifying its validity within society. Through the years, constructs have changed as apparent through common hobbies, names, and fashion. Often following trends beginning with the habits of the rich and famous, even in the lifespan of an individual, changing perceptions of what is 'cool' or 'trendy' fluctuates from pokemon cards to heeilies to dyed hair. Constructs are created for all ages and effectively compartmentalizes lives in stages to be passed through and a set script for each stage.

All in all, social constructs slip in unnoticed into American society and any other society in the world. Initially as a way to keep order on a personal level, these constructs have elevated into a strict hierarchy, controlling and attacking those who choose not to abide by the set of "rules" as clearly shown by the detrimental effects on women due to unattainable beauty standards. Removing all social constructs would dissolve a country's stability and identity, and while not all social constructs merit removal, it is just as important that when constructs become restrictive toward growth and acceptance, action must be taken.

Education is one way to combat the growing intolerance within society of those who don't fit in with most others. Bringing awareness of how individuals can differ and still understand each other and get along is a key aspect to bringing changes to society as a whole. Society cannot be blamed for constructs: those who constitute society are the ones responsible for changing the conventions of the world. Complacency and apathy only impedes growth of society and acceptance of those who are striving for acceptance and change. Over time, all the constructs in society evolve and the only way to progress to a more accepting society is for individuals to learn about what in their everyday life has been constructed, if those constructs create negative surroundings, and how to change those false conceptions to more diverse ideals.

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