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Publication Date

2008-02-01

Becoming “Beautiful” ... Becoming “American”?
A Study on Constructions of Beauty and Identity Among Korean and Filipina Women in the United States
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We live in a time and a culture focused on improvement and constant re-modification in the pursuit of perfection. This quest for perfection is exemplified in today’s growing cosmetic surgery industry, which gives new meaning to the notion of “self.” Medicine and technology facilitate the literal re-construction of the self: one can become the “new me” both internally and externally. With the exponential rise of plastic surgery, the ability to mold, alter, and re-create the body has taken on new, extreme, dimensions. In 2001, Taiwan reported a million cosmetic surgery procedures – double the number of procedures performed since 1997 (Takeuchi Cullen 2002). In 2002, Korean surgeons estimated that at least one in every ten adults had undergone some sort of aesthetic surgical procedure, and the numbers of cosmetic surgeries seemed to be rising among children as well (Takeuchi Cullen 2002). Within the United States, cosmetic surgery procedures had jumped to 6.9 million in 2002, a 226% increase since 1997, and unsurprisingly, Asia and Europe have followed this trend (Guterl and Hastings 2003). This rise in *plastic culture* reflects not only the malleable nature of beauty, but also that of identity (Bordo 1993).

Beauty, like gender, has a performative element to it; one can “do beauty” analogous to how one can “do gender” (West and Zimmerman 1987). Consequently, the ways in which we do beauty are a series of personal constrained choices, reflecting how we perceive ourselves within society, and how we wish to be perceived. However, how one *wishes* to be perceived, and how one is *actually* perceived are not necessarily congruent, especially within socially stratified communities founded on hegemonic ideologies of race, class, and gender. The experience of an

immigrant, or being perceived as one, undoubtedly plays a considerable role in the creation of identity. Asian women, for example, feel pressured to fit a narrow standard of beauty and strive to blend into the dominant aesthetic ideals of American culture/society. These women must balance the contradictory worlds of being Asian, American, and female, and establish themselves within a context filled with numerous, and often times conflicting, pressures and expectations. Thus, Korean and Filipina women engage in beauty and bodywork to reconcile issues of ethnicity, identity, and beauty within American society.

Beauty and bodywork literature has focused primarily on the ways the body is read as a social text, through the ascription of meaning to certain physical traits as “good” or “bad” (Bordo 2003; Hesse-Biber 1996; Kimmel 2004; Pitts-Taylor 2006, Weitz 2004). For instance, people have come to read overweight individuals as lazy and generally negative individuals (Bordo 2003). The reading of bodies results in great pressure to adhere to specific standards of physical appearance that represent positive traits (i.e., moral goodness, desirable social status) (Gilman 1999). The White, Western ideal of beauty is the standard by which most bodies are measured across communities and cultures (Banet-Weiser 1999; Gilman 1999; Hall 1995). The media has been accused of proselytizing these images to young women, resulting in various forms of bodywork: ranging from skin bleaching to eating disorders (Banet-Weiser 1999; Bordo 2003; Gilman 1999; Gimlin 2002; Hall 1995; Hesse-Biber 1996). In particular, minorities work towards a White beauty ideal, some even resorting to cosmetic surgery, which has become increasingly available with new technological advancements (Bordo 2003; Gimlin 2002; Kaw 1998; Kuczinski 2006; Morgan 1998; Pitts-Taylor 2006). These beauty ideals not only divide individuals in terms of good and bad, but also in terms of white and non-white. The distinction across race within beauty and bodywork makes it meaningful to examine the steps immigrants

take in molding their physical appearance to fit into a specific sector of American society. The changing of physical appearance provides insight into how immigrants attempt to identify themselves within the American culture, as well as illuminates which sector within the country they believe will accept their presence.

Current immigration theory typically measures assimilation into American society through educational attainment and socioeconomic success, assuming entry into the middle class as a proxy for becoming “American.” Within sociology, immigration and assimilation studies have focused on reconsidering the traditional linear model of assimilation. Alejandro Portes and Rubén Rumbaut proposed a new model for understanding the immigrant experience through a process known as *segmented assimilation*. Their model is founded on the notion that immigration is a series of dynamic processes that include the immigrants’ social origins, contexts of departure and arrival, and their adaptation experiences in their new homeland (Portes and Rumbaut 1996; Zhou 1997). Portes and Rumbaut (1996) describe the first step of the adaptation process as acculturation, which includes learning the customs of the country as well as its language. Recognizing that the immigrant experience is dynamic and complex, they propose that not only are there different degrees of acculturation, but also, different adaptation outcomes. One possible outcome is selective acculturation, which occurs in sufficiently integrated immigrant communities; immigrants adopt American ways while maintaining strong ethnic bonds. Another outcome is dissonant acculturation, which tends to result in a process of “Americanization” that is synonymous to the adaptation to norms and customs of the inner city. Following the process of acculturation, is the second step of adaptation: assimilation.

Portes and Rumbaut explain that assimilation is segmented based on two elements: social context (i.e., skin color, geographic location, and labor market changes) and acculturation

patterns. In Espiritu and Wolf's study on the children of Filipino immigrants in San Diego, it was clear that "speaking English and owning one's home do tell us about economic integration but not about socioemotional matters" (Espiritu and Wolf 2001). Rather, looking at other factors, such as the clothing styles of immigrants and their children, and the "culture" they *choose* to adapt to most, are better indications of how they identify themselves within an American context. Similarly, in their study of Nicaraguans living in the United States, Patricia Fernández-Kelly and Sara Curran (2001) focused on how Nicaraguan children embraced "ghetto culture" as means of identification and to resist "being American." Nicaraguan children were defensive in their remarks, stating, "You don't have to be American to have a life" (Fernández-Kelly and Curran 2001). The rhetoric of these children indicates that they equate blacks as being non-American, and whites as being American. The decision to acculturate and assimilate to a certain segment of American society is to some degree a consequence of being rejected by the White, middle-class youth. It is important to note that these immigrant youth portrayed the sector of American society they felt most comfortable with through their physical appearance, reflecting an important aspect of assimilation that is frequently disregarded in immigration and assimilation literature. Consequently when considering my research question, I accounted for possible influences of gender norms as well as immigrant experiences for these women.

I framed my research around a set of hypotheses that explained the ways in which Korean and Filipina women engage in beauty and body work. The first hypothesis was that because of the minority status of Asians, it is inevitable that the native cultures of these women would adopt the Anglo-Saxon, upper-class ideals of beauty. Furthermore, considering the insufficient title of the "Asian American" experience, I assumed that individual ethnicities play a much more crucial role in understanding beauty practices, identity construction, and social assimilation. As a result,

my second hypothesis was that Koreans work harder than Filipinas to conform to beauty standards and body work of the Anglo-Saxon ideal because they physically deviate more from the norms. Thirdly, for Koreans, who have been known to have strained relationships with other minority groups in the United States, beauty standards become understood in terms of socio-economic class rather than of racial groups and cultures. Lastly, for Filipinos, who seem to have more successful experiences in social assimilation into other cultures – specifically African American and Latino cultures – beauty standards are broadened to encompass these communities as well. However, this creates other expectations and pressures that may not necessarily be felt by Koreans and other Asian groups. With these four hypotheses, I conducted my research and illuminated the intricate ways in which beauty work, race, gender, and power relations inter-relate in the construction of identities of Korean and Filipina women in American society.

Due to geographical and financial constraints, I localized my research to Korean and Filipina women residing in the New Jersey and New York area. However, this localization did not prove to be a hindrance to my research, for this region is known for its prevalent Korean and Filipino populations. In 2000, New Jersey had the fifth-largest Asian American population in the United States (Census 2004). Utilizing a snowball technique, I found a sample of Korean and Filipina women. I conducted 20 in-depth interviews with 9 Korean and 11 Filipina women between the ages of 18 and 30. From these interviews I found similarities and differences among these women in how they spoke about, and how they engaged in beauty and bodywork.

When considering the beauty work of these women, there must be a fine, yet distinctive line drawn between the way they talk about beauty, and the way they practice beauty. Similar themes across ethnicities emerge in their beauty rhetoric, reflecting the existence of a collective experience for these women. They discuss beauty in terms of sexual morality, which may stem

from the hypersexualization of Asian women in Western culture. These women also speak with inherent American idealism, focusing on their agency to resist gendered norms and on their independence in making their own choices about the types of beauty work they can engage in. Through beauty rhetoric, these women dispel popular stereotypes of hypersexuality and passivity associated with Asian women. Divergences in rhetoric, however, arose when discussing personal beauty ideals; Korean women not only had narrower ideals of acceptable beauty norms (i.e., body size), they also explained their own appearances by referencing social class, while Filipina women referenced the social culture they associated with (i.e., black or Latino culture).

Greater divergence among these women became evident in their beauty practices. The Korean women had similar looks and very little diversity in body types. In contrast, the Filipina women ranged extensively in body types and other physical traits (i.e., clothing styles). Although both groups of women spoke of dieting, Korean women were much stricter in policing their eating patterns to adhere to a much narrower definition of acceptable body size. Many of the Filipina women, though they were currently on diets, allowed themselves more leniencies in their body weight. One possible explanation for this leniency is that Filipina women more readily reject specific white ideals due to their ability to enter African American and Latino communities, in contrast to Koreans, who have historically had strained relations with both communities in the United States. Another possible explanation for this observation is Filipina women in the sample came from households with “strong mothers” – mothers who had professional jobs and in some cases, were the reason why the family immigrated to the United States. Subsequently, even though strong patriarchal values were established within these women’s lives, their daily interactions with their mothers could also empower them to resist certain traditional norms of gender and beauty.

The Korean women's strict adherence to white beauty ideals could be attributed to their inability to enter other social circles and cultures (i.e., African American and Latino). Consequently, they understood their beauty choices and practices as being reflective of their social class, rather than that of an ethnic or racial group. Both groups of women worked towards beauty ideals that helped them establish their identities in the social circles they associated with. The divergence in their choices and practices are indicative of the differences in their social circles. The Filipina women in the sample looked towards racial and ethnic groups to identify themselves and to establish a place within the society, while Korean women looked towards social class as their main identifying characteristic. The practices of these Korean women reveal important factors of the Korean experience within the United States: (1) the inability to foster relations with other minority groups (Kim and Lee 2001), and (2) the desire to have superiority over the dominant group (Espiritu 2003).

Considering the general findings of beauty practices performed among these Asian women, from the basic similarities that are attributed to the pan-ethnic identity they are given within the American context to the inherent differences attributed to their distinctive lived experiences and histories, this project relates to the broader literature in several subfields found in sociology: gender and beauty, gender and immigration, and immigration and assimilation. In terms of studies in gender and beauty, this research considers how a relatively understudied population utilizes beauty work to construct identities. This population is unique, however, because their beauty work cannot be isolated from their ethnicities. Although these women may not always be cognizant of this, their beauty rhetoric and practices reveal the ways in which these women are attempting to reconcile the conflicting experiences of being female and Asian within American society.

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