

Primed For Ripeness

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There was a time when the world was full of women named Daisy and Iris and Lily and Rose. Naming daughters after nature's blooms was considered a high compliment, a celebration of feminine beauty. Flowery names aren't in fashion so much these days, but the tradition of linking blossoms and womanhood runs long and deep. Just think back on the romantic imagery of Shakespeare or Burns or Keats.

The tradition may go back even further than that as it turns out, way back before poetry and language, and indeed may be deep-wired into our neurons. Some psychologists are now suggesting that the association between blooming flowers and womanhood may have ancient evolutionary roots, indeed that our liking for sprays of heather and violets may be the vestige of a long-lost survival skill: the ability to spot a good sexual partner. What's more, this primordial connection may explain all sorts of modern human preferences that are completely unrelated to sexuality or mating.

Here's the basic idea. When our ancient ancestors were first becoming human, the key to the species' survival was sexual "fitness." That is, primitive humans had to find strategies to produce hardy offspring, who then did the same, and on and on. One of these primitive strategies was an ability to select, from all the possible mates, the most healthy and fertile. Put another way, early humans became hypersensitive to signs of ripeness, and this hypersensitivity became deeply engrained in our perception and thinking and emotion, where it remains today.

What happens with these primitive skills, though, is that they are blunt instruments. They don't discriminate well, so that a cognitive shortcut that was intended for mate selection is also applied to other living things—apples, for example, or greyhounds or marigolds. So today we retain a hard-wired bias that makes us favor any living thing at its peak, and to disfavor anything that's unripe or in decline.

At least that's the theory, which Yale University psychologists Julie Huang and John Bargh decided to test in the laboratory. They designed a series of experiments to see if, by piquing the fundamental human desire to mate, they could increase people's sensitivity to a variety of cues to immaturity, growth, peak ripeness, and decay.

Here's an example from their lab. The psychologists had a group of volunteers, all young adults, read a passage from the book *See Jane Date*, by Melissa Senate. This book is apparently a classic of "chick lit," focusing on the lives of unmarried but nubile young women, and it was intended to jump-start the readers' mating instinct. Another comparable group of volunteers read a bland passage describing the interior of a building.

Then they had both groups look at four photographs of the actress Jane Withers, each from a different stage of her long acting career. Some may remember Jane Withers as "Josephine the Plumber," in the TV ads for the cleanser Comet, in the 1960s, but she actually began acting in the 1930s as an adorable

toddler, and also played roles as a teen and as a leading lady. The photos showed all of these stages of her life.

The volunteers were then asked to rate the four images in terms of the actress's appeal. The idea was that those with mating on their mind would find the actress much more appealing in her prime, and devalue her when she was either older or sexually immature. And that's exactly what they found. Those who had not been primed for sex showed no strong preferences for prime years over youth or later years.

So this supports the evolutionary link between the "ripeness bias" and tastes in human beauty. But does the bias go beyond humans? To test this, Huang and Bargh modified the experiment a bit. They again primed some of the volunteers with the passage from *See Jane Date*, but this time they had them look at photographs of bananas. Some of the bananas were green, some yellow-green, some completely yellow, and some mottled with brown spots. All the volunteers then rated the attractiveness of the fruit.

I know what you're thinking. Yes, most of us prefer yellow bananas to either green or brown bananas. They generally taste better and have better texture. But what the psychologists were measuring was the difference between volunteers who had been primed for mating and those who had not. And they did find a big difference in their preference for perfectly ripe bananas and for bananas before or after their peak.

So it really does seem that people are primed for ripeness. But for those who remain skeptical, the psychologists decided to check this notion one more way. There were no automobiles on the savannahs three million years ago; not even carts. So if the theory is sound, these same fundamental preferences for peak age over newness and senescence should apply only to living things, not artifacts. The psychologists ran one more experiment, basically the same as the other two, but in this one they had the volunteers rate photos of flowers and cars. They predicted that they would have maturity-related preferences when it came to flowers, but not when it came to cars.

An automobile's peak, for this study, was when the car rolled off the assembly line, spanking new. Other photos showed the car under construction or beginning to rust with age. The flowers went from bud to full flowering to wilting. And the scientists found just what they expected. That is, being primed for mating did shape people's preference for blooming flowers, but it had no effect on their preferences for the life stages of a car. We may not like to see our trusty old cars rust out, but it apparently has no deep psychological resonance.

These findings, reported in the June issue of *Psychological Science*, may go way beyond our preferences for floral imagery and women's names, the authors conclude. Think of a completely unrelated social domain, like the workplace. If these age-related biases really do run so deep, and are so easily activated, might they have an effect on, say, our judgments of career ability? Ageism may have deeper roots than we know.

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