

**FEATURES
SECTION**

Letters to the Editor

Dear Sir,

Averageness as the Ideal—a reply

I would like to thank Robert Newcombe for his interest. He is quite right in that ‘averageness’ alone is probably too simplistic a concept. However, following a search through the relevant psychological and evolutionary biological literature, it is impossible to escape the conclusion that with the modifications discussed, it is one of the most prominent of hypotheses attempting to define the aesthetic ideal. My discussion was limited to facial aesthetics alone. I do not know whether it is appropriate to extend it to include *dental* aesthetics and human morphology in general, as Robert has done. I do know that many, if not most, of the measurements we regard as ‘ideal’ in facial aesthetics are based on the mean, from anthropometric and cephalometric growth study material.

Whilst there is evidence supporting the contribution of ‘averageness’ to the facial aesthetic ideal, the basis for a dental aesthetic ideal has obviously not been investigated in the same way, but the idea that a ‘normal’ or ideal occlusion is attractive because it represents the mean, might be worth considering. It has occurred to me that in the overall spectrum of malocclusions that confront the orthodontist, ranging say from a Class III anterior open bite through to a traumatic Class II division 2, that a normal overbite and overjet relationship does sit mid-way between the two extremes. Similarly, and contrary to Robert’s argument, ‘straight’ teeth, i.e. those with absence of irregularity, do sit equidistant between severe crowding and marked spacing, but perhaps we are just considering different types of scale. It is true that orthodontic goals for males and

females do not seem to differ. On the other hand, whilst the relative position of teeth may not be a factor, their shape and size certainly are, and there are obvious differences for male/female objectives within restorative dentistry.

Tooth colour was far beyond my self-imposed remit. If the ideal is a ‘modified’ form of averageness, then one of the modifications, other than enhanced facial secondary sex characteristics, is perhaps youth (as represented by tooth whiteness), i.e. one of the components for attractiveness as a prerequisite for finding a suitable mate for the production of offspring.

The application of averageness to overall body size and shape was also beyond the scope of my discussion. The concept as applied to facial appearance has an evolutionary biological basis and attempts to explain attractiveness as an instinctive reaction. Perhaps our modern lifestyle distorts our morphology more readily than our instinctive reactions to it. Possibly, if we still lived primitively as hunter-gatherers, then an ‘ideal’ body mass index, apparently currently shifted to the left of what is ideal in modern society, would be more centrally placed.

The debate about the validity of averageness and its modifications as the facial aesthetic ideal has been going on for many years. My intention was to draw this, as well as the other background considerations, to the attention of our specialty, as the factors that determine our perception of aesthetics are clearly fundamental to what we do. I am grateful to Robert for giving the subject further exposure.

R. J. EDLER

