

Introduction: Studying the ‘facesphere’

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1. A controversial object of study

Early comparative studies in academic scholarship on the meaning of the face show a dichotomy between, on the one hand, physical anthropology and anthropometry and, on the other hand, cultural anthropology and ethnology. The former tends to privilege static measurements and determinism, the latter, dynamic observation and contextual interpretation. The former often yields to racial prejudice and even systematic racism, as well as to unethical research practices, whereas the latter rejects such views and methods and emphasizes the role of sociocultural context in the development of face types, their expressions, and the relative meanings, which, however, sometimes results in ideologically and aprioristically denying any impact of human biology on the meaning of the face.

As regards the positivistic trend, Goldstein 1936 (an article on the age-related changes in the dimensions and form of the face) surveys the previous literature, starting from early anthropometric comparative works such as Weckler 1866, Hrdlicka 1900, Boas 1911, Hellman 1927, 1935, Connolly 1928, up to Huber 1931. Other early comparative works along this line – also often influenced by racist prejudice – adopt an embryological perspective (for instance, Schultz 1920, Schaeffer 1935), or an interspecies comparative approach (for instance, Krogman 1930, 1931a, 1931b, 1931c). This tradition of comparative anthropometry with focus on face growing continues with Loth still displaying blatant racist prejudice in the late 1940s: “It is very hard to study facial muscles on the living subject, and is possible only with intelligent people with whom one can communicate to evoke the desired facial expression...I...gave up this study in Uganda” (Loth 1949: 222).

In the following decades, overt racism disappears from literature on facial comparisons, but determinism persists under other guises, for instance, in linking the morphology of faces and facial expressions to climate conditions (Steegman

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