

WHAT'S THE DIFFERENCE? A SOCIOLOGICAL ANALYSIS OF AGE- DISPARATE RELATIONSHIPS AND HOW THEY FIT IN AS A CONTESTED SEXUALITY

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In my first marriage, I was married to a woman who was three years older than me. When we got married I was ten days past my 21st birthday and she was six weeks shy of her 24th. We split up when we were 28 and 31 respectively. Our courtship prior to marriage lasted seven months and our marriage itself lasted a total of ten years by the time we were able to complete all of the steps necessary to finalize our divorce; we had separated two years before then. For my second marriage, I married a younger woman who was 6.5 years younger than I was. We married when I was just shy of my 34th birthday and she was 27.5 years old. Our courtship prior to marriage lasted 2.5 years and we have been married now for over 11 years.

I provide all of this background to create some context for why I wish to discuss age-disparity between partners as a contested sexuality. For both of my marriages, the age difference was considered “outside the norm;” what some might call “deviant” by definition. Lehmiller and Agnew in their study, “May-December Paradoxes: An Exploration of Age-Gap Relationships in Western Society,” share US Census Bureau statistics that show that the largest percentage

(32.4%) of marriages in the U.S. feature a husband and wife within one year of age. Only 5.9% have a wife that is 2-3 years older, while 12.3% have a husband that is 6-9 years older (Lehmiller & Agnew, 2011, p. 45). The questions I'd like to explore in this paper are: At what point does an age-gap in relationships become an obstacle, how large a gap must there exist before it becomes contested in our society, and who bears the brunt of the stigma often associated with this age-gap?

When my current in-laws got married, they shared the exact same age difference as my second wife and I: 6.5 years, but my father-in-law was 25 at the time and my mother-in-law, 19. When my second wife and I got married, I had three kids from my first marriage. My father-in-law had two kids from his first marriage when he remarried. When he and my mother-in-law married it was in the early 1970s. When their daughter, my second wife, and I married it was 2004. Why is it that their relationship was far more contested than my wife's and mine? The fascinating aspect of these types of relationships, and what I've discovered in my research is that there are so many different influencing factors as to how society perceives these situations including the actual ages of those involved, the era in which the relationship was formed, the socioeconomic status of each individual, and the culture in which the relationships develop. However, the one defining characteristic common to almost every age-disparate relationship is that the woman in the relationship

receives most of the negative social response.

By digging into the research on this topic, I found that there are several different areas of interest in the current literature. The first involves the many double standards between the perceptions of men and women that exist in Western society when it comes to age-gaps in relationships. The second looks at the effects of age-gaps as they particularly affect young girls, mostly teens, in relationships with older men and the implications this has on unwanted pregnancies and STIs. The final area of study in this field looks at how these types of relationships play out in developing countries, in particular sub-Saharan Africa, and how oftentimes young girls are forced into relationships with older men in the name of familial security and economics. What I discovered in the literature is that the common denominator in each of these areas of study is that women generally bear the brunt of the stigma and residual negative effects associated with these types of relationships. Whether older or younger, or from a developed versus underdeveloped country, women are usually the main focus of maligning conversation.

One of the types of relationships that has become the most contested in recent years is the phenomenon of older women being with younger men, otherwise known as the “cougar” phenomenon. This sexuality is mostly contested because society has a much harsher view of older women with younger men, than with older men being with younger women. Milaine Alarie and Jason T. Carmichael in

their study, “The ‘Cougar’ Phenomenon: An Examination of the Factors That Influence Age-Hypogamous Sexual Relationships Among Middle-Aged Women,” discuss the recent media trend in which “women’s relationships with younger men are generally depicted as temporary flings that rarely culminate in serious commitment” (Alarie & Carmichael, 2015, p. 1251). They reveal that “media depictions of ‘cougars’ often hold these women up for ridicule or present them as sometimes dangerous” (p. 1251). This is ironic given that the common definition of a sexual predator is usually a middle-aged white man. What Alarie & Carmichael discovered in their research is that “When it comes to finding a marriage companion or a sex partner, aging affects men and women differently. As they advance through midlife and old age, men tend to choose women who are increasingly younger. Considering that most women would prefer to have a partner of similar age, the imbalanced sex ratio among single people makes it quite challenging for middle-aged women to find a suitable partner” (1252). Could it be that older women are simply responding to the sexual marketplace in that, if the bulk of available men are younger, then that is what they choose to, or perhaps are forced to, pursue.

The societal response to these types of age-discrepant relationships has been researched for the past several decades. Apparently, time has had little effect on the stigma associated with this contested sexuality. Gloria Cowan did a widely read study in 1984 called,

“The Double Standard in Age-Discrepant Relationships.” At the time she wrote, “No research exists which directly tests the effect of age differences on evaluations of relationships” (Cowan, 1984, p. 18). She set out to prove whether, “the relationship potential of a hypothetical couple would be rated lower if the female is older than the male” (18). What she discovered was that, “The evidence for the double standard is clearest when there is a large age discrepancy” (21). These results were confirmed many years later in 2001 when Collette Banks and Dr. Paul Arnold published their study, “Opinions towards Sexual Partners with a Large Age Difference” in the *Marriage and Family Review*. What they discovered in their study was, “that most age-different relationships are found to be generally unacceptable,” and, “that age-different relationships in which the woman is older [were] viewed as less acceptable than if the man was older” (Banks & Arnold, 2001, p. 15). The question one might ask is, why do we as a society disparage women when there is a large age-gap in a relationship, particularly when the older woman is with a much younger man, and yet men are lauded for their prowess in most cases where the situation and gender roles are reversed?

The preceding two studies looked at relationships in general. In connection to my story, I looked for evidence of age-difference and its effect on marriages specifically. In their 1993 study entitled, “Age Dissimilar Marriages: Review and Assessment,” Berardo et al. combed through the literature and confirmed once again that, “While

women are experiencing more latitude in selecting partners who are slightly younger, in marriages with large age gaps the older male/younger female union remains the overwhelmingly dominant pattern” (Berardo, Appel, & Berardo, 1993, p. 97). I have experienced the truth of both sides of this reality. As I described earlier, I was married to a woman three years my senior and now one six years my junior. I can honestly say that in my experience our age differences did not play an extrinsic role in the success of the relationship, as far as I could tell. One of the main issues the Berardo study attempted to address was the suggestion that, “age dissimilarity might affect marital stability” (99). What they discovered was that, “research has failed to support the presumed link between age heterogamy and measures of marital stability” (100). In my own experience, I can say that my marriage to an “older” woman was far less successful than my current marriage to a woman significantly younger. But, as I stated above, I would argue that our ages at the time we got married and extemporaneous factors such as family and economic stability played a far greater role in both of these scenarios. Lehmilller and Agnew suggest that, “Age-gap partners appear to be more trusting, less jealous, and less selfish in their relationships compared to persons who are more similar in age to their romantic partners” (Lehmilller & Agnew, 2011, p. 26). Based on my recollections, I would concur.

In the discussion earlier about “cougars,” I eluded to the stigma

attached to these types of relationships. In his book The Trouble with Normal: Sex, Politics, and the Ethics of Queer Life, Michael Warner writes, “The politics of shame [...] includes vastly more than the overt and deliberate shaming produced by moralists. It also involves silent inequalities, unintended effects of isolation, and the lack of public access” (Warner, 1999, p. 7). What he’s revealing here is that one of the main reasons why people employ such a double standard between men and women in age-disparate relationships is that maybe they feel it isn’t “normal.” He argues that “it seems to be that variant desires are legitimate only if they can be shown to be immutable, natural, and innate” (9). This idea is confirmed by Abby Ferber when she argues that, “What it means to be human is constrained and defined by norms of cultural intelligibility. In other words, our cultural norms make certain forms of living and being comprehensible to others, while at the same time making other forms unimaginable” (Ferber, 2009, p. 94). The controversy attached to the “cougar” phenomenon may simply be a manifestation of our inability as a society to see the beauty and value in women as they age.

The second area of research in age-discrepant relationships dealt mainly with young girls and the effect that relationships with older males had on their overall sexual, mental, and emotional health. Darroch, Landry, and Oslak in their study, “Age Differences between Sexual Partners in the United States,” reveal the following statistics: “Adolescents were significantly more likely than older

women to have a partner who was 3-5 years older than they were; among unmarried women [...] teenagers were significantly more likely than women aged 25-29 to have a partner who was 3-5 years older than they were; and, 56% of the births resulting from conceptions among women aged 15-17 in 1994 were fathered by men three or more years older than the women” (Darroch, Landry, & Oslak, 1999, p. 163-166). The authors of this study conclude that, “Pregnancy rates are clearly highest for teenage women with the oldest partners; such a situation is troubling to the public because it raises the concern that age difference may make it more difficult for young women to resist pressure to have sex and to become pregnant” (167). There are several levels of ramifications for young girls given these realities that include legal, physical, and emotional damage.

In their report to the American Bar Association, Elstein and Noy argue that, given these statistics, “Communities must now take further steps to understand why sexual relationships between adult males age 20 and older and young adolescent girls are unacceptable, and to recognize that according to the law, they are nearly always criminal acts” (Elstein & Davis, 1997, p. iii). There’s no doubt that relationships in which men 20 and older are dating girls that are 15-17 years old are considered contested in our society. Even though the age difference in these relationships may not be vast, this seems to be an age-range where we have a clearer definition of appropriateness. If you add 10 years to each of these ages, it describes the

situation in my second marriage. I was 31 when we met and my wife was 25. We received very little negative attention for this age difference, but imagine how the situation may have been perceived if I was 21 and she was 15. This would be an interesting topic for further research. At what point does an age-gap switch from reprehensible to acceptable?

Not only are there legal consequences for the young girls in these types of relationships, but in many cases, these women are putting their health at significant risk by engaging in sexual activity with older men. In a study published in the *Archives of Pediatric and Adolescent Medicine*, it was demonstrated that, “Female adolescents with adult partners who are at least 5 years older were at increased risk of endangering both their own health and that of their unborn child by using alcohol, marijuana, or other illicit drugs during pregnancy” (Rickert, 1997, p. 279). The authors of this study also found that, “Consistent with previous research, [...] pregnant adolescents with older-adult vs. adolescent male partners were more likely to establish independent households. As a result, these young women may not benefit from the social, emotional, or financial support available to some pregnant adolescents who reside with their families” (279). Because these relationships are often so contested within families, these partners will often isolate themselves from their community and this ends up having a negative effect on their health, economic, and overall well-being.

Much of the stigma associated with teen pregnancy caused by relationships with significantly older men is also both psychological and emotional. Arlene Stein writes in the introduction to her book Shameless: Sexual Dissidence in American Culture, “Shame [...] arises from the failure to live up to an internal image of oneself, the self one is ‘supposed to be.’ It is more elemental, reflecting on one’s total being. Shame arises from seeing one’s self negatively from the imagined viewpoint of others” (Stein, 2006, p. 6). Shame is a tool often employed by society to demean both older women with younger men and young girls who find themselves pregnant from a relationship with an older man. As I have argued throughout this paper, men very rarely receive this type of societal disdain when engaging in these relationships. Elisabeth Sheff in her book The Polyamorists Next Door talks extensively about how stigma affects those involved in a contested sexuality like polyamory. She defines stigma as “a personal characteristic that society has deemed undesirable and thus marks the stigmatized person as tainted or spoiled” (Sheff, 2014, p. 217). She goes on to state that, “Stigma always exists in social context and can change dramatically from one setting, historical era, or subculture to another” (217). When my second wife and I forged our relationship, into which I brought three children from my previous marriage, we received very little negative feedback from the community in which we were submerged in 2004. However, when my in-laws, who were significantly younger when they met,

but within the same age-gap as ours, fell in love and formed their relationship, with my father-in-law also bringing children into the relationship, they received a tremendous amount of negative attention from the community they were in during the early seventies. Ironically, there are cultures in which the age difference is considered beneficial from an economic and social standpoint. Unfortunately, this often leads to unhealthy sexual practice much like the young women engaged in age-disparate sexual relationships in the above studies. This is where I found my final area of research on this topic.

One of the largest areas of research exploring this topic was on how age-gap relationships influence communities in Africa. In a study entitled, “Confronting the ‘Sugar Daddy’ Stereotype: Age and Economic Asymmetries and Risky Sexual Behavior in Urban Kenya,” researcher Nancy Luke set out to discover the influence of what has been called the “Sugar Daddy” individual in sub-Saharan African communities. She writes that, “The stereotypical sugar daddy is an adult male who exchanges large amounts of money or gifts for sexual favors from a much younger woman” (Luke, 2005, p. 6). She goes on to reveal that, “The perception that sugar daddies are numerous seems reasonable in many African contexts because social norms often permit (and even encourage) men to engage in sex outside of marriage and with younger partners” (6). What Luke was trying to ascertain is why the “Sugar Daddy” phenomenon may exist in these communities. Her hypothesis was that economics had the most

influence overall. In other words, young women in these communities often struggle so much financially, that they turn to older men to help them in return for sexual access. One of the main consequences of these relationships and the reason why it is so contested is that the young women often forego safe sex practices in these relationships in an attempt to make themselves more attractive to these potential, what some might call, “investors.” What Luke discovered was that, “The largest age and economic asymmetries are associated with the lowest probabilities of condom use” (12). While Luke’s study was more quantitative in nature, another qualitative study was done by Kim Longfield et al. entitled, “Relationships between Older Men and Younger Women: Implications for STIs/HIV in Kenya,” at approximately the same time. After conducting a number of one-on-one interviews and running several different focus groups in the region, Longfield and her fellow researchers discovered that the young women in these communities’, “primary incentive for becoming sexually involved with older partners is financial and material gain, whereas men commonly seek younger partners for sexual gratification” (Longfield, Glick, Waithaka, & Berman, 2004, p. 132). When it came to the types of risk that these young women were exposing themselves to, these researchers report that, “Cross-generational couples [in this study] are preoccupied with generalized risks such as fear of discovery, of pregnancy, of emotional abandonment, and of economic hardship rather than of their personal risk of

acquiring STIs and HIV” (133). This coincides with the data from the Rickert study above in which young girls who engaged in sex with older men usually did so at great risk to their overall health (Rickert, 1997). Much like the categories I’ve discussed thus far, we see again in these African studies that it is the young women who bear the consequences of these age-disparate relationships.

In Amy Steinbugler’s book, Beyond Loving: Intimate Race-work in Lesbian, Gay, and Straight Interracial Relationships, she centers her discourse on the effects of interraciality in relationships, but she makes an astute observation in her final chapter when she states that, “Heterosexuals do attempt to manage others’ impressions when it comes to the meaning of interracial intimacy, and for this they draw upon the symbolic resources attached to their heterosexual status” (Steinbugler, 2012, p. 158). These symbolic resources do not exist, at least not primarily for women, when there are significant age differences between intimate partners. As I have shown throughout this paper, there are stigmas attached to almost all age-disparate relationships, but the bulk of the stigmatization is always attached to the female partner. Whether it is the newer phenomenon of the “cougar” culture, young adolescent girls engaging in sexual intercourse with men in their twenties, or young African women seeking economic assistance by forming relationships perceived as having a “sugar daddy,” globalized social norms seem to consistently ostracize women in these relationships to a far greater degree than men.

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