

Marketing Love and Sex

Elaine Hatfield · Megan Forbes ·
Richard L. Rapson

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When we first set out to write a reply to Mark Regnerus' paper, we found ourselves confused. We were not quite sure what he was trying to say. At first, it seemed as though the author was taking a traditional Evolutionary Psychology approach to explaining mate selection. (Sentences like: "In spite of great social changes . . . Today's mating market is no less dominated by men's interests, and quite possibly more than in previous generations"). But then as we read on, it seemed "Maybe not." As he talked about the tremendous social changes brought about by the birth control pill (p. 4), and the critical importance of the dating and mating markets in shaping attitudes and behavior, it seemed as if he were pointing out that social and technological factors often temper traditional evolutionary constraints. But: "No". We read a little further, and it became clear that he was arguing that while men might be shaped by social changes and market forces, women were . . . What? Were women more malleable sexually? (p.2). Tremendously inflexible, still vainly pursuing love (not sex), in spite of momentous social advances? What? Arguing that the 18th century Enlightenment had not benefitted women? That the 20th century sexual revolution had played a cruel trick on women?

So we set off for the Web, in hopes of finding out what Regnerus' theoretical approach might be and, with luck, finding out exactly what he was attempting to say. And the bells went off! We were submerged in a flood of furious bad feeling—all directed at Regnerus. The anger was generally centered on papers that addressed the problems of gay and lesbian families. A sample: Mark Regnerus is a hateful bigot. He's an ultra-conservative with links to Opus Dei. His new research paper

on same-sex parenting is "intentionally misleading" and "seeks to disparage lesbian and gay parents." His "so-called study doesn't match 30 years of scientific research that shows overwhelmingly that children raised by parents who are LGBT do equally as well." His "junk science" and "pseudo-scientific misinformation," pitted against statements from the American Psychological Association and "every major child welfare organization," deserve no coverage or credence. (Saletan 2012, p. 1).

Wow!

This was one of many such postings.

We returned to his paper with a clue as to the source of its confusions. Regnerus' paper is perplexing because it is faced with the task of reconciling his deeply held convictions as to what constitutes a good society, with the vast research (and sometimes incompatible) literature on gender differences in desires, emotions, and behaviors re: love, sex, and mate selection. Alas, the author seems familiar only with a thin slice of the scientific literature and relies on his own prejudices in selecting what "facts" to report, to the grave detriment of his paper. How then to proceed?

Instead of hurling ourselves into the poisonous debate (the University of Texas recently embarked on a controversial investigation into the ethics of his research but found no violations) or pointing out which of Regnerus' assumptions are supported by the data and which seem wildly off the mark, we decided to take a more productive tack.

First, today, scholars from a variety of theoretical disciplines—social psychologists, neuroscientists, cultural psychologists, anthropologists, evolutionary psychologists, and historians—have become interested in the cultural, historical, and personal experiences that shape men and women's romantic and sexual preferences. Thus, we will begin by briefly reviewing what scholars have learned about the dating and mating market over the past 40 years. We will find that, (as Regnerus argues), there is strong evidence that, in selecting partners, market forces are powerful determinants of who ends up with whom. (This discovery is not, however, as recent as he supposes.) We will then tie this

E. Hatfield (✉) · M. Forbes
Department of Psychology, University of Hawaii,
3334 Anoai Place,
Honolulu, HI 96822-1418, USA
e-mail: elainehatfield582@gmail.com

R. L. Rapson
Department of History, University of Hawaii,
3334 Anoai Place,
Honolulu, HI 96822-1418, USA

research into studies of external forces, such as the dramatic movement since the Enlightenment toward gender equality and the importance of factors such as sex ratios that have been shown to influence mating dynamics. Finally, we will speculate as to where we might expect such research to go in the future.

The Current State of Affairs in Mate Selection Research

True, most people yearn for an ideal mate. In fairy tales, Prince Charming often falls in love with the scullery maid. In real life, however, dating couples generally end up with a “suitable” partner—which means the most appealing partner they can attract in a competitive dating market. As Goffman (1952) dryly observed: “A proposal of marriage in our society tends to be a way in which a man sums up his social attributes and suggests that hers are not so much better as to preclude a merger” (p. 456).

Since the 1960s, scientists have conducted a flood of research documenting that people tend to pair up with romantic and sexual partners similar to themselves in physical attractiveness (see Hatfield et al. 2008, for a review of this research.) In one early experiment, Elaine Hatfield and her students invited freshmen at the University of Minnesota to a get-acquainted dance. Couples were promised that a computer would match them with a blind date that was just right for them. (In truth, the students were randomly matched with one another.) When the freshmen arrived to purchase their tickets for the dance, the researchers rated their physical attractiveness. They assessed their intelligence by consulting transcripts of their high school grades and their scores on the *Minnesota Scholastic Aptitude Test*. They gauged their personality traits by recording their scores from a battery of tests, including the prestigious *Minnesota Multiphasic Personality Test* and the *California Personality Inventory*.

At the dance, the 400 couples chatted, danced, and got to know one another. Then, during the 10:30 p.m. intermission, the experimenters swept through the dance hall, rounding up couples from the dance floor, lavatories, and fire escapes—even adjoining buildings. Researchers asked the students to tell them frankly (and in confidence) what they thought of their dates. Did they plan to ask them out again? If *they* were asked out, would they accept? Six months later the researchers contacted couples again to find out if they had, in fact, dated. Here are some of the things they found:

1. All young men and women yearn for the stars. When asked what kinds of dates they desired, everyone, regardless of what *they* looked like, preferred (in fact,

insisted) on being matched with the best looking, most charming, brightest, and most socially skilled partner possible.

2. Those whom fate had matched with handsome or beautiful dates were eager to pursue the relationships. Keep in mind that some of the handsome men and beautiful women had expressed total disinterest in their computer dates, especially if they were unattractive; some even admitted to treating them rudely. No matter. Everyone wanted to see the good-looking computer matches again. When couples were contacted 6 months after the dance, participants (whether they were good looking or homely; well treated or not) had in fact attempted to wangle a date the best-looking. The more handsome the man and the more beautiful the woman, the more eagerly he or she was pursued.
3. In this study, every effort to find anything else that mattered failed. Men and women with exceptional IQs and social skills, for example, were not liked any better than those who were less well endowed.
4. Finally, men and women cared equally about their dates' appearance.

In a series of follow-up studies, Silverman observed couples in a variety of natural settings—in movie theater lines, in singles bars, and at assorted social events. Regardless of what they might once have wanted, in fact, most couples were found to be remarkably similar on the attractiveness dimension. A beautiful woman was most likely to be standing with a handsome man. A homely man was most likely to be spotted buying a drink for a homely woman. Furthermore, similarity did seem to “breed content.” The more alike couples were in physical appeal, the more delighted they seemed to be with each other, if intimate touching is any indication of one's feelings. Sixty percent of the couples comparable in attractiveness were engaged in some type of fondling, while only 22 % of mismatched couples were touching.

Of course, in the dating and mating “marketplace,” physical appearance is not the only thing young people have to offer. Couples can be well- or ill-matched in a variety of ways. For example, a collection of young beauties, all chose Woody Allen, who is not particularly handsome but is charming, intelligent, and unusually rich. In fact, before his current marriage, he was frequently listed among “the most desirable bachelors” in New York. Other young people may care about personality, fame, socio-economic status, or kindness. These various assets all contribute to ones “mate value”—a general indicator of how desirable a person is in the dating market. Certain assets, such as wealth, status, and beauty increase ones social desirability, while simultaneously increasing the *number* and *quality* of potential partners one may choose from.

Equity theory¹ (Hatfield et al. 1978) assembled voluminous evidence documenting the critical importance of the dating “marketplace” in mate selection. Specifically, scholars find: Attractive men and women—whether they are gay, lesbian, or heterosexual—assume that a “suitable partner” must be more socially desirable (i.e., more attractive, intelligent, personable, rich, well adjusted, and kind) than do their less attractive peers. Perceived equity has been found to be important in sparking passionate love, sexual attraction, and sexual activity. Market considerations have been found to affect both gay and straight people’s romantic and sexual choices. The market also affects the sexual bargains men and women craft in prison and the amount prostitutes charge for “risky” sex. Couples are likely to end up with someone fairly close to themselves in social desirability. Couples are likely to be matched on the basis of self-esteem, looks, intelligence, education, mental and physical health (or disability). People rarely get matched up with someone who is either “out of their league” or “beneath them.”

Equitable relationships (i.e., well-matched relationships) are satisfying and comfortable relationships; inequity is associated with distress, guilt, anger, and anxiety. Those in equitable relationships (well matched relationships) are less likely to risk extramarital affairs than are their peers. Equitable relationships (well matched relationships) are more stable than are inequitable relationships.

Are there serious gender differences in the assets and liabilities men and women search for (and consider to be “deal breakers”) in the dating marketplace? Here, in spite of Regnerus’ claims, the evidence is not so clear.

Evolutionary theorists contend that men are willing to pay a somewhat higher price for good looks, virginity, fidelity, and chastity, while women willingly pay more for status, support, and kindness (Baumeister and Vohs 2004; Buss and Schmitt 1993). These preferences in partner qualities are, according to evolutionary theorists, largely attributable to our biological predispositions. That is to say that women prefer men who can provide resources and support because this would ultimately benefit them in child rearing. Men, on the other hand, prefer women who are beautiful and chaste because, among other reasons, physical attractiveness is a cue of good health (increasing the probability of conception) and chasteness will provide assurance that any offspring are indeed their own and not those of another man (Buss and Schmitt 1993).

It should be noted, however, that there are always exceptions to the rule. Research on sociosexuality (i.e. willingness to engage in casual sex), has shed some interesting light on

the mating preferences of men and women by suggesting that, though many men tend to prefer shorter term relationships with multiple partners and women may tend to prefer longer term relationships with fewer partners, there is considerable cross-over between the sexes on these preferences. To explain this cross-over, evolutionary theorists argue that women who prefer short term partners typically seek out men who are more physically attractive in order to procure “good genes” for their resulting offspring. On the other hand, men who prefer long term mating do so because they possess a relatively low mate value (in terms of attractiveness, wealth, and status) and as such must sweeten the pot, so to speak, by putting stability and emotional investment on the table.

A note: Although a few gender differences certainly exist, in general men and women are far more similar than different. Within gender, variance is always far greater than between gender differences. People’s tactics for achieving their goals will obviously vary depending on cultural, social, and environmental constraints.

Some evolutionary psychologists assume that, in general, men care about looks, women care more about power and status. In reality, those differences are exaggerated—especially when you are talking about casual encounters. When you ASK men and women how much they care about, say, looks, power, and status (when they sign up for, say, a Matching service, or in a typical academic self-report study) they dutifully reflect the conventional wisdom. When you look at actual behavior, however, (at mixers, in speed dating, in bars, in hookups, etc.), however, you get a far different picture. When selecting real flesh-and-blood casual partners, men and women turn out to be surprisingly similar in their desire that he/she be good looking and “hot.” Good looks seem to be the *sine qua non* of a pick-up. This is true whether those “cruising the scene” are gay, straight, or lesbian; American or foreign born (See Eastwick and Finkel 2008; Hatfield et al. 2012, for a summary of this research.) In addition, men and women in the modern world appear to be becoming more similar in their attitudes, feelings, and behaviors with the passage of time (Oliver and Hyde 1993; Petersen and Hyde 2010.)

Research seems to indicate that in the early stages of a dating or sexual relationship, considerations of the marketplace prevail. Men and women will attempt to attract a socially desirable partner and will be profoundly concerned with how rewarding, fair, and equitable their budding relationships are. As for personal attributes and overall mate value, it appears as though people are not only aware of their own value, but also the value of others, and as such may adapt specific mating strategies to compensate for either their strengths or shortcomings. In all these matters, gender differences appear to be declining.

¹ Equity theory was an early attempt to integrate the insights of reinforcement theory, economic theory, and evolutionary theory in predicting mate selection. Principles of “matching” are the outcome.

Recent Theorizing

Today, most social scientists, evolutionary psychologists included, take a bio-social-psychological approach to understanding mate selection and the market. They acknowledge the importance of proximal causes (such as culture, society, the historical era, and the environment) in shaping attitudes and behavior, as well as the distal causes of genes and biology. In a recent *Psychology Today* article, for example, evolutionary psychologist David Schmitt argues:

It seems doubtful that the brains of men and women have a different design across cultures. Instead the human sexual brain is designed to functionally respond to local circumstances and activate the lust, love, and attachment systems differentially depending on ecological conditions. As a consequence, scholars have begun to explore the importance of such proximal conditions as market considerations and sex ratios in shaping mate selection.

A population's sex ratio, is defined as the number of sexually receptive men compared to the number of sexually receptive women in a given population. In a classic text, *Too Many Women? The Sex Ratio Question*, Guttentag and Secord (1983) provided a theoretical model for understanding the impact of gender inequalities (in number) on a society. They pointed out that in all societies there are two kinds of power: *structural power* (throughout the world men generally are more powerful in agencies of government, justice, business, etc.) and *dyadic power* (who has the most power in the dating and mating market). If, in a given society, sex ratios are markedly skewed—and such imbalances can be caused by a variety of factors, such as religious practices, societal preferences for boys or girls (infanticide), migration, wars, and differentials in deaths—it should have a profound impact on men's and women's social power. If a society has too many men (if it is male-biased) or too many women (if it is female-biased), young people may find themselves in an impossible situation; some will inevitably end up without a mate. When many young men were killed in WWII, for example, young women were often forced to forgo hopes of marriage and to seek out jobs as teachers, secretaries, sales girls, and factory workers to support themselves. These women soon developed more “modern” notions as to what was fair in the world of work.

According to Guttentag and Secord, in male-biased populations (where there is a premium on women) women will be highly valued and seen as coveted possessions. Traditional roles and divisions of labor will prevail, and there will be a stress on sexual morality. A recent article published in *The New York Times*, entitled “For Many Chinese Men, No Deed Means No Dates,” provides an excellent illustration of this fact. Due to a cultural preference for sons, China has found itself with a surplus of approximately 40 million men. This, as you can imagine, has had a considerable influence

on the Chinese mating market. As noted in this article, Chinese women have their “pick of the litter” when it comes to finding a partner. As a consequence, only the most desirable men are lucky enough to be able to find a mate. In such societies, women tend to marry at a relatively young age, while men tend to marry when they're older—and only after they have amassed considerable status, power, and wealth. In terms of sexual practices, fidelity and monogamy tend to be the standard, as men must adhere to women's sexual preferences in order to attract a partner. It should be noted, however, that in societies with too many men, the sex industry (i.e. prostitution) tends to be widespread—making the transmittance of STI's and AIDs a particular concern.

When men are at a premium, however, women are the ones having to vie for men's affection. In these societies, sexual permissiveness and promiscuity are widely accepted, as women are viewed as sex objects. Furthermore, in these societies, women are less likely to get married and more likely to get divorced than they are with balanced sex ratios. Adultery is also commonplace, and illegitimate births are exceedingly widespread. Evidence for these propositions can be found in the population statistics of Post World War II Russia. After losing millions of men in the war, the Russian population was substantially skewed, leaving men in extremely short supply. This resulted in a number of societal changes. First, it meant that women had to enter the workforce to help provide for themselves and their families. Additionally, due to the lack of men, marriage rates took a nosedive, and out-of-wedlock births skyrocketed. In this society, domestic violence and extramarital affairs also increased markedly.

In addition to these societal impacts, sex ratios also have profound economic implications. As you have perhaps gleaned from the examples provided above, the accumulation and spending of wealth differs depending on sexual market conditions. In a comparative study of two cities in Georgia, namely Macon and Columbus, for example, researchers found that men's spending and saving habits, particularly during courtship, differed greatly. In Columbus, where there were too many men, men spent more on their dates and were more willing to go into debt during courtship than were men in Macon (where there was an oversupply of women). This demonstrates once again that mating strategies differ with market conditions and sex ratios.

Suggestions for Future Research

As mentioned previously, scholars' predictions as to the importance of sex ratios in shaping romantic and sexual attitudes and behaviors are based on the principle of supply and demand. Essentially, the principle states that the more options that people possess, the more likely they are to

demand and get the things they desire. In the past, scholars have generally assumed that (1) men and women possess traditional (and unchanging) desires for love and sex, and (2) that the markets they confront are closed systems. Both of these assumptions are more appropriate to 1950 (if not 1500 A.D.) than today. Recently, Richard Rapson and his fellow historians catalogued the many changes that have occurred since the Enlightenment and have made predictions as to the social, economic, and technological advances that might be expected in the next 50 years. In this final section, we will consider the impact of two major social changes: (1) the marked increase in the status of women—which has granted them increased power and freedom; and (2) the possibility that men and women (especially those who find themselves in severely limited markets) can use modern cyber-technologies to increase their options, on men and women's expectations and choices.

Changing Gender Roles Since the Enlightenment, women's status has been steadily increasing (Dabhoiwala 2012). In recent years, seismic shifts in men's and women's roles have occurred. Specifically, women, who were historically thought of as wives and mothers, have entered the realms of education and work force *en masse*. In fact, as Regnerus notes, women are now more prominent in college settings, more successful in degree attainment, and have higher earnings growth than do men. Traditional family structures have been supplemented with two-income families, single parent families, gay families, and various other structures.

So what does this mean for sex ratios, equity, and the overall mating market? Well, for one, it reduces the necessity for women to find a partner that can support them and their children. Does this alter women's preferences and choices? There is some research that suggests that women with resources are likely to demand more in mates—insisting they be young and attractive as well as possessing other assets—than are their less advantaged peers. This raises the definite possibility that—if men and women possess the same economic power and status—women will come to value the same traits that men typically do when seeking partners. We suspect they will. Additionally, with men and women both earning a livable wage, how will relationships be renegotiated in terms of equity? Will men be taking on new roles as women become economic contributors? A growing body of research suggests that this is indeed the case and that change is well under way. As women play a greater role in the workforce, men are beginning to contribute more to household work, though not quite to the same extent as women do. Will women be more willing to pair up with other women (who offer love and intimacy) than with men, who offer less? How, if at all, this will continue to change is yet to be seen. But we are not living in static times.

Expansion of Dating and Mating Markets Any time a new form of communication is invented—the penny newspaper, Morse code and the telegraph, the ham-radio, TV, or computers—men and women find ways to use that technology to find love and sex. In the 1950s, almost as soon as computers appeared, commercial matchmaking services sprang up. Most scholars who have studied the impact of sex ratios on love and sex have written as if men and women are restricted to local markets—to their own campus, the neighborhood bar, etc. Obviously this is no longer the case. As noted, recent developments—like the Web, Match.com sites, Facebook, Skype, speed dating, mail order brides (for Russian and third-world women), and easy transportation—mean people can search for sexual partners any where in the world. Compare this to pre-modern Western villages, where individuals often failed to come across more than 200 individuals in their entire lifetime (Robb 2007).

Sites such as Match.com and Chemistry.com, are designed to appeal to the general population. Other sites target special niches. There are sites designed to appeal to various age groups (HookUp.com, SilverSingles.com), political groups (ConservativeMatch.com, LiberalHearts.com), religious groups (CatholicSingles.com, Jdate.com, ChristianCafe.com, HappyBuddhist.com), and sexual orientation (GayWired.com, superEva.com). Dating sites also exist for people who possess mental and physical disabilities, unusual sexual preferences, and so forth. Even people who wish to find dates for themselves and their favorite pets can sign on to a site (DateMyPet.com). At the time this Commentary is being written, there were more than 1,000 dating websites servicing the U.S. There are also sites such as Facebook, Skype, and new institutions like Speed Dating.

In fact, in our own time, those men and women who suffer from a restricted range in their home communities—intellectuals, gays, young men, older women, people with disabilities, people with “kinky” tastes, etc.—can now use computers to expand their horizons. That expansion proceeds apace.

Will this technology circumvent the impact of skewed sex ratios? Future research should seek to be more global in scope, as people are no longer confined to their towns, states, or even countries when seeking a potential mate.

Nothing is Settled

We have seen that there is compelling evidence that men and women are influenced by market conditions in selecting potential mates and dates. The extent to which men and women desire the same or very different things in a casual and more serious mate is subject to debate—as is the extent to which the genders are becoming more similar in their

attitudes, desires, and sexual behaviors. The profound social changes, economic, and technological changes that are occurring may well have an important impact on what men and women desire in their “exchanges.” Failing to adapt to the kinds of changes we might expect to see in the next 50 years can lead to the condition that futurist, Alvin Toffler, famously described as “future shock.” When it comes to gender, love, and sex, nothing is settled.

Further Reading

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Elaine Hatfield is a Professor of Psychology at the University of Hawaii and past-president of the Society for the Scientific Study of Sex. In 2012, the Association for Psychological Science (APS) awarded her the William James award for a Lifetime of Scientific Achievement. She is generally considered to have pioneered the scientific study of love and, over most of the last four decades, been listed as the most cited social psychologist in the world.

Megan Forbes is a doctoral student at the University of Hawaii. Her master’s research involved creating an artificial online dating website to test the potential effects of skewed sex ratios on sociosexuality, and the qualities that individuals both portray about themselves and seek out in others.

Richard L. Rapson is a Professor of History at the University of Hawaii. He has written more than a dozen books, most of which focus on the psychological side of American life, past and present. His recent books include *Amazed by Life: Confessions of a Non-religious Believer* (2004) and *Magical Thinking and the Decline of America* (2007).