

# Sex, Dating and Love: Differences between Men and Women

Roxana Kreimer

## Introduction

Recent years have highlighted the value of different types of intelligence. It came the turn of mating intelligence, that consists of the entire set of psychological abilities for courtship as well as to form, maintain, coordinate and terminate relationships. This type of skills are influenced by biological, psychological and social factors, and it is important to avoid the reductionism of our analysis to only one of these three areas.

During the twentieth century there has been a lot of research related to the social and psychological patterns in our ways of living sex and love, but only recently there have been significant advances in the field of biological influences.

Scientific research has provided valuable evidence about several irrational sources that influence mate choice. In reviewing this evidence, philosophical counseling can lead us to more fulfilling choices. In this article I will start by differentiating the biological factors that influence the way men and women relate to sex and love as reflected in current scientific evidence. I will point out a number of the problems that these influences pose for the development of a proper mating intelligence for men and women, given that courtship and the development of a relationship require a great deal of cognitive work. I will illustrate the analysis with cases taken from my practice of philosophical counseling. My perspective in this article is that love can be understood as an art, as something we learn and improve on, not just something that ‘happens’ to us.

### Biological influences in mating intelligence of men

Courtship strategies were developed as an evolutionary drive for generational increase of offspring. An increase in the number of partners does not lead to more offspring for

women, whereas it definitely does for men. When evolutionists talk about these strategies, they are referring to patterns of behavior that are unconscious.

The biological differences between men and women in their sex and love lives can be understood as differences in parental investment. In most species, females invest more than males, in the sense that men do not have to pay the physiological cost of pregnancy, while for a woman this is a commitment of her entire body. Across a wide range of age groups and continents there is a vast body of evidence which suggests that on average males have a greater investment in sexual variety than females. In 48 nations across the globe, men are reported as being more interested in having a large selection of partners throughout their life-span than women.<sup>1</sup> Although there are socio-sexual factors which influence differences across the sexes, culture itself does not affect differences in sex drive. Men select more partners in a speed-dating context and want to have sex earlier than women, and give more reasons for having sex than women. Their motives include knowledge ("I wanted to increase the numbers of partners I had experienced"), opportunity ("The person was available"), physical pleasure ("I was horny"), utilitarian reasons ("to improve my sexual skills"), and social status ("I wanted to look good"). Men are more likely than women to have sex outside a relationship and to indulge in short-term mating strategies.

In some ways men and women are more similar than dissimilar. Both prefer a sexual relationships based on love and commitment and value generosity, mutual love, humor and intelligence. Despite their highly contextualized strategies, there are nevertheless very important differences which adversely affect a number of their selections. Both want to fall in love, and infatuation lasts an average of three to four years, a strategy on the part of Nature to ensure that the male stays with the female during the early years of parenting. There are systems for long-lasting couples with high parental investment in other species. One example among birds: the European Robin (*Erithacus rubecula*), most commonly known in

Anglophone Europe simply as the Robin. The male remains with the female while the breeding is not autonomous.

Humans are characterized by a strategy for long-term relationships, even if the model of couples who last for a lifetime is in crisis (long term relationships are not necessarily equivalent to "a whole life"). For many evolutionists this explains that women, being more vulnerable, are more selective, a strategy that also characterizes females of other species. Clark and Hatfield's study found that men who approached women for casual sex were perceived as less desirable by women, while women who approached men for casual sex were not perceived as less desirable by men.<sup>1</sup> Women perceived men who approached women for casual sex as more physically dangerous and less likely to provide sexual satisfaction, and as having lower social status. Familiarity with men reduced the force of these perceptions (e.g., if the woman knew the man before, or if he was famous). From the point of view of adaptation, this familiarity would represent a lower risk for women. In the same study, women were much more likely to agree to have sex with a famous actor than with a complete stranger, whereas men were only slightly more likely to agree to have sex with Angelina Jolie than a complete stranger. We are not suggesting that men on average do not emphasize the need to have an affinity with their partners, just that it is not the most predominant requirement.

Men put an emphasis on beauty over other attributes in maintaining a stable relationship<sup>2</sup>. As we have seen above, this is not a prerequisite for casual sex. Evolutionary psychologists suggest that this may be due to biology, since men on average feel more

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attracted to women who are of childbearing age, increasing the chances of fatherhood.

Society reinforces this requirement by associating the idea of female beauty to youth.

Men who have casual sex or who form stable couples with other men also favor beauty and its association with youth over other attributes, while this preference does not seem so prevalent among lesbian couples.

These biological influences are unconscious, and can negatively affect men's choices, leading them to favor beauty far above other relevant traits -for example, ethical values, or cultural affinities, and making them suffer in the future all the negative consequences related to the incompatibility of characters and the lack of affinities. Men often leave their partners because they are no longer young and they no longer feel physically attracted to them in order to start a new couple with a younger woman. Even if he has children from a previous marriage and does not want to have more, he does so to please his new partner, assuming in many cases a host of economic and care responsibilities he would have preferred to avoid, even putting his health at risk where those responsibilities require more work than he can handle.

The fact is that men transgress sexual exclusivity pacts more than women, which often leads them to transgress ethical codes, such as lying to their partner, although they often love them.

Juan attended a philosophical counseling session when he was in the process of separating from his second wife. He had left his first wife when he fell in love with Laura, an attractive 25 year-year-old who worked as a secretary in the office where he was manager. He had two sons from his previous marriage, of 22 and 24 years old, and a little child of five from his new one. His young wife used to react very aggressively to small mistakes. For example, if he promised to fetch their son from a birthday party, and he was a little bit late, she accused him of not taking care of their child, she screamed to him in the middle of the

street and told him to sleep outside the house that night. She had a very bad relationship with the two sons from his previous relationship, criticizing them for no apparent reason and not even allowing them go out with their younger son under the pretext that they did not take good care of him. If Juan tried to defend his other sons, she accused him of being against her.

In the session we worked around some communication tools for assertiveness and suggested he could consider other female attributes in his choice of a future mate. For example, we worked around the empathic assertiveness, the idea that it is useful for communication to start a sentence empathizing (for example, "I understand that you can be upset by my late arrival to the birthday party. Nevertheless, this does not mean that I am not taking care of our child. I promise to fetch him in time in the future"), progressive assertiveness: (if the other does not respond satisfactorily to empathic assertiveness and continues to violate rights, insist more firmly but without aggressiveness), positive-assertiveness (expressing appreciation and affection for the other person), match point (find a limited point of agreement), broken record (repeat one's claims in a friendly and courteous tone whenever one encounters a not legitimate resistance).

David Buss and his colleagues have provided evidence which suggests that, compared with women, men are particularly astute at detecting signs of a female partner engaging in sexual infidelity.<sup>ii</sup> Men remember more details regarding sexual infidelity than women do. Buss argues that men's astuteness regarding this issue is an evolutionarily shaped adaptation. Men in our evolutionary past were faced with the problem of paternal certainty – unlike females, who are always sure that their offspring are their genetic kin. As males are never completely sure that their offspring are their own, evolution may have favored them in providing cognitive abilities that helped to reduce the likelihood of a mate's sexual infidelity. They probably have a mechanism that helps them predict whether a female will have sex with another man. This is one of the many psychological processes that taken together represent

mating intelligence, although this particular bias favors male jealousy, one of the starting points of the violence which leads to the death of many women all over world.

Another common bias in men is the tendency to overestimate the significance of the signals women give to show sexual interest. In terms of adaption this could be an advantage in encouraging men to court.<sup>iii</sup>

#### Biological influences in mating intelligence of woman

Some studies reveal that women also have biases with regard to courtship.<sup>iv</sup> They are commitment skeptics. This means that they are more likely than men to be skeptical of statements of commitment. As women are at risk for getting stuck with the cost of raising offspring without other parental help, they tend to be skeptical about men's commitment. The cost of this bias is minor compared with its major evolutionary benefit, which is to reduce the likelihood of mating with an unreliable partner.

Let's see an example from a philosophical counselling session. Martha is a 37-year-old who met a man in the house of mutual friends. They liked each other and two days later they met by chance in the street, and Martha invited him to go to a concert that night.

"Did you go out together?" -I asked.

"No" -said Martha-, "he said he was sorry but he couldn't go."

"What exactly did he say?"

"That he had a sour throat and wasn't feeling well."

"Did you invite him for some other time?"

"No, it was obvious he was making an excuse."

"How did you notice that?"

"Just by what he said, that he wasn't feeling well."

"Couldn't it have been true?"

"Yes, but one more day passed and he has not phoned me yet."

“He might in the future.”

“May be.”

That weekend he phoned and since then they have been seeing each other every day and now plan to move in together to the same apartment.

What other unaware biological influences can affect women's mate strategies? On the one hand, in various animal species, females are more selective than males because, as we have seen, the copula has more consequences for females than for males. On the other hand, also in various animal species the female chooses the dominant male. In social animals, the alpha is the individual with the highest rank. Male alphas may gain preferential access to sex or mates. Common chimpanzees show deference to the alpha of the community through ritualized gestures such as bowing, allowing the alpha to walk first in a procession, or standing aside when the alpha challenges them.

When they can choose, women in general also feel more attracted towards men with power. When I refer to ‘power’ I mean material resources, creativity, sense of humor, fame, prestige within a given group, or a specific talent that stands out from the average. <sup>v</sup> The expectation that men should be taller and older than their female partner may also be related to this power issue. Since men in positions of power tend to be a select few, it implies that these ‘alphas’ are seduced by several women in competition with each other. This situation does not favor women, because if they have mated an "alpha" man they risk being abandoned, and if they have fallen in love with a married ‘alpha’ and have initiated a relationship with him, there's a greater chance that their investment will not fulfill their expectations. Moreover, competition among women can lead to weight loss far beyond what it is recommended for good health.

Paula attended a session of philosophical counseling after she got pregnant by a professor of the university where she had started teaching. She was 32 years old and he said

he was not happy with his marriage. As often happens, Paula thought that he would abandon his wife and they would raise their son together. But he had no intention of leaving his wife, and he finished his relationship with Paula. A year later, he told her that he had divorced his wife because he had fallen in love with a student and they were very happy. A better informed choice (knowing, for example, the disadvantages of being attracted to an alpha male) could have led Paula to choose otherwise.

In a study, Martie Haselton and Geoffrey Miller found that during ovulation women prefer short-term relationships with men who appear to have good genes (e.g., men who have more sense of humor, creativity, intelligence and physical attractiveness), while during the rest of the month, they give priority to men's status and other indications such as the ability and willingness to invest in protection, provisioning and care of potential offspring.<sup>vi</sup> Some women can mate with a man who has both characteristics (good genes and good dad potential), but most women will end up with a partner who is not ideal at all levels.

There is a very low probability that these preferences are conscious. Women's preferences cannot only be explained by cultural conditioning, as it is unlikely that culture causes women to favor creativity on high fertility days but not on low fertility days.

Humor may also have greater appeal for women depending on their fertility cycle.<sup>vii</sup> In a study 206 female participants read storyboards about potential male mates with different levels of humor. Men who were described as being funnier were rated by women participants as significantly more socially sensitive, adaptable, extroverted, exciting, happy and able to play with kids, as well as more intelligent, kind, tall, healthy, masculine and muscular. In the imagination of women, men who are funny promise all sorts of features and virtues!

Research suggests that while both men and women say they like a good sense of humor in a potential mate, they differ in what they mean by this phrase. Women tend to prefer men who make them laugh, whereas men tend to prefer women who laugh at their jokes.<sup>viii</sup>

In another study, Jennifer Hay found that males produce humor in courtship much more often than females. More than twice as many women as men seek a sense of humor or someone who will make them laugh.<sup>ix</sup> Women tend to seek humor more than they offer it, whereas men are more likely to offer a sense of humor than to seek it. Funny women can be immensely sexy, and many men do value humor in women. But taken together, these results suggest that females, on average, prefer men that are funny. The problem is that in choosing a man for his sense of humor over other attributes women can cause problems for themselves because men, on average, make jokes that many women find too aggressive. Hay's study suggests that in most happy couples that last over time, women are more active in producing jokes, and men are more disposed to enjoy women's jokes.

Alice came to a session of philosophical counseling when she began to have problems with her boyfriend, a stand-up comedian who criticized her with sarcasm, and when she asked him to talk to her without being aggressive, he told her: "Darling, it's just a joke! Don't you have a sense of humor?"

Psychologists in Britain found that professional artists and poets have more partners than other people. Daniel Nettle, a psychologist at Newcastle University's School of Biology, and his colleague Helen Clegg, asked 425 British men and women, including professional artists, poets and schizophrenic patients, about their creative activity, sexual encounters and mental health characteristics.<sup>x</sup> Although creative people have long been associated with active sex lives, the researchers believe their study is the first to support this claim with empirical evidence. They found that professional artists and poets had between 4 and 10 sexual partners, while less creative people had an average of three. The study also showed that the average number of sexual partners increased as the creative output went up. What the artists produce draws attention to them, which seems to enhance their sexual allure. *"It could be that very creative types lead a bohemian lifestyle and tend to act more on sexual impulses and*

*opportunities, often purely for experience's sake, than the average person would,"* said Nettle. According to the researchers, the active sex lives of artists is often tolerated even by long-term partners, who are less likely to expect loyalty and fidelity from them. But if a woman does not want an open couple relationship, this could be another trap related to the way she chooses a partner. She may feel more attracted to artists, but her chances of being abandoned or of living triangular relationships could increase.

We said before that in different animal species females are more selective than males because sex has more consequences for females than for men. This can be seen, for example, in speed dating and in websites for online dating. On the other hand, we know that we can fall in love with the person of our dreams but remain with the one who pays attention to us. Nevertheless, we could ask ourselves if this extreme selectivity does not harm women's mate choice. John Townsend suggests that some feminists are wrong when they argue that men choose women who do not want to compete with them for intellectual status.<sup>xi</sup> His hypothesis is that men are less selective: unlike women, they do not require a superior status to their partner, so the number of women that can be chosen increases. Are women who want to have a partner being damaged by their high selectivity?

Another trap into which women may fall is to seek a long-term relationship but feel attracted to more seductive men, who on average are oriented to short-term relationships.<sup>xii</sup> This is particularly evident in speed-dating, because here both women and men declare what they are looking for, and we can assess whether they achieve their goals or not. The chances are low: in a study of speed-dating done in Germany by Jens Asendorpt, 6% succeeded in their search for casual sex and 4% succeeded in their search for long-term relationships. Men who wanted a committed relationship had a higher probability of success, while the majority of women who wanted a committed relationship ended in a short-term relationship because they felt more attracted to more seductive men. The study followed participants for a whole

year and, many more women than men seeking stable couple relationships did not achieve their goal.

### Conclusions

Schools not only should include sex education but also mating intelligence skills. Human intelligence for matchmaking is extremely complicated. Men and women are often 'deceived', not by their partner but by unconscious biological, psychological and social factors that influence their choice. In my book, *Falacias del amor* ('Love Fallacies'), I studied some social influences that link love to suffering, and I identified several fallacies that derive from a conception of love that has been characteristic of Western Culture.<sup>xiii</sup> In this article I have reflected on unconscious genetic influences that may not favor the selection of the best partner. I think it is important to encourage philosophical counseling to interact with recent scientific studies, and not only with the insights of philosophers.

Love is an art: we can learn it, improve it and teach it. It is something that we make, not that only 'happens' to us. It is the result, and not the cause of a relationship. Therefore, it is important for us to know some of the potential influences that can spoil our decisions, because this knowledge might allow us to make more conscious and responsible choices.

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<sup>i</sup> See David P. Schmitt, "Sociosexuality from Argentina to Zimbabwe: a 48-Nation Study of Sex, Culture, and Strategies of Human Mating," *Behavioral and Brain Sciences*, 28 (2005): 247-275.

<sup>ii</sup> See David Buss and Martie G. Haselton, "The Evolution of Jealousy," *Trends in Cognitive Sciences*, 9 (2005): 11, 506-507.

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- iii See Glenn Geher and Scott Barry Kaufman, *Mating Intelligence Unleashed: The Role of the Mind in Sex, Dating, and Love* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).
- iv Ibidem.
- v See Jhon Marshall Townsend, *What Women Want – What Men Want: Why the Sexes still See Love and Commitment so differently* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 1998).
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- ix Ibidem.
- x See Daniel Nettle and Helen Clegg, “Personality, Mating Strategies, and Mating Intelligence,” in *Mating Intelligence: Sex, Relationships, and the Mind’s Reproductive System*, 121-135.
- xi See Townsend, *What Women Want – What Men Want*.
- xii See Jens B. Asendorpf, Lars Penke and Back Mitja D., “From Dating to Mating and Relating: Predictors of Initial and Long-Term Outcomes of Speed-Dating in a Community Sample,” *European Journal of Personality*, 25(2011): 1, 16-30.
- xiii See Roxana Kreimer, *Falacias del Amor, ¿Por qué anudamos amor y sufrimiento?* (Buenos Aires: Paidós 2005).