Why do people disparage May–December romances? Condemnation of age-discrepant romantic relationships as strategic moralization

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ABSTRACT

Romantic relationships with a large age difference between partners are judged to be less acceptable, more disgusting, and less likely to succeed than age-similar relationships. We investigated the role of strategic moralization in condemnation of man-older age-discrepant relationships. We hypothesized that (1) this condemnation promotes self-serving interests of those who stand to lose from violation of age-based assortative mating, and (2) endorsement of prostitution mediates the association between participant's age and condemnation of man-older age-discrepant relationships because these relationships make the exchange of sex for resources explicit and acceptable. Using self-reports from 430 participants, we documented that endorsement of prostitution mediates the association between age and condemnation of man-older age-discrepant relationships for women but not men.

1. Introduction

Couples assortatively mate on variables such as age, income, and education (e.g., Watson et al., 2004), with men usually mated to women who are slightly younger than themselves (Saardchom & Lemaire, 2005)—a consequence of women's preference for a slightly older partner (e.g., Buss, 1989; Rudder, 2010). However, some relationships include partners with a relatively large age difference, hereafter referred to as *age-discrepant* (i.e., *May–December*) *romantic relationships*.

Existing research on age-discrepant romantic relationships is sparse and largely descriptive. Previous research has shown that age-discrepant romantic relationships are more likely to dissolve (Wu & Hart, 2001), and have higher rates of intimate partner homicide (Breitman, Shackelford, & Block, 2004; Daly & Wilson, 1988) compared to age-similar romantic relationships. Wilson and Daly (1993) speculated that people who enter age-discrepant relationships have individual characteristics (e.g., a history of violent crime) which may explain this pattern, but the only study to test this speculation found no support for it (Breitman et al., 2004). Alternatively, age-discrepancy may present a unique set of relationship challenges which increase the risks of relationship dissolution and intimate partner violence (e.g., jealousy, sexual proprietariness; Block, 2000; Campbell, 1992).

Regardless, third-party observers report negative perceptions of age-discrepant relationships compared to age-similar relationships, which may reflect sensitivity to these unique relationship challenges. Only two studies have examined third-party perceptions of age-discrepant relationships, documenting that raters judge them to be less acceptable, more disgusting, and less likely to succeed than age-similar relationships (Banks & Arnold, 2001; Cowan, 1984). Cowan (1984) compared adolescents' perceptions to adults' perceptions, and focused on differences in perceptions of male-older versus female-older relationships. Cowan did not report comparisons across the two age categories (adolescents and adults) for man-older relationships, in particular. Neither study investigated the role of participant's age, sex, their interaction, or other variables that might explain third-party's negative cognitions (e.g., unacceptability, low likelihood of relationship success) and emotions (e.g., disgust) toward age-discrepant relationships. Given the increase in age-discrepant relationships in modern times and the stigmatization of these relationships (Lehmiller & Agnew, 2011), the current research addresses a significant gap in the literature.

One theoretically informed explanation for these negative third-party evaluations may be that age discrepancy signals information about partners and their relationship that may be relevant to third-parties. Certainly, men and women engage in mate choice copying (i.e., observing and subsequently copying the mating preferences of conspecifics; Bowers, Place, Todd, Penke, & Asendorpf, 2012; Place, Todd, Penke, & Asendorpf, 2010; Waynforth, 2007) and use partnership status to assess otherwise unobservable qualities in a potential mate (Rodeheffer, Leyva, & Hill, 2016). Because large age-discrepancies are considered non-ideal (particularly for women; see Buunk, Dijkstra,

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Kenrick, & Warntjes, 2001; Kenrick & Keefe, 1992), third-parties may assume that partners are exploiting or being exploited by one another. Indeed, exploitative interpersonal relationships are perceived unfavorably relative to non-exploitative relationships, particularly when a relationship is based on explicit exchange rather than mutual concern for a partner's welfare (e.g., Clark & Mills, 2011; Clark & Waddell, 1985). To this end, individuals may perceive age-discrepant romantic relationships to be more exploitative, and thus more morally abhorrent, relative to age-matched relationships, insofar as age-discrepant relationships are perceived to be based on explicit exchange rather than mutual concern for a partner's welfare. One way to test this hypothesis is to compare attitudes toward age-discrepant relationships with attitudes toward explicitly exchange-based romantic relationships (e.g., prostitution, which involves an explicit exchange of sex for money).

Self-serving moralization may explain why certain people condemn age-discrepant relationships. Because these relationships violate age-based assortative mating, their condemnation may function to protect the interests of those who stand to lose from such violations. Many age-discrepant relationships involve an older man and a younger woman (e.g., U.S. Census Bureau, 2013) which is most likely driven by men's sexual preference for youth (e.g., Buss, 1989; Sohn, 2017). For example, men rate women in their early 20s as most attractive regardless of their own age, whereas women rate men slightly older than themselves as most attractive (e.g., Rudder, 2010). Older men have the potential to benefit from man-older age-discrepant relationships because they can act on their preference for mateship to much younger women. Older women and younger men, in contrast, stand to lose the most from man-older age-discrepant relationships. Older women (compared to younger women) are at greater risk of their similar-aged partners (and potential partners) pursuing younger, more desirable women. Younger men (compared to older men) are at greater risk of losing desirable potential mates (i.e., young women) because it would be more difficult for them to capitalize on cohort-related mating advantages such as spatial proximity and familiarity which are afforded in settings such as school and work (e.g., Reis, Maniaci, Caprariello, Eastwick, & Finkel, 2011). Thus, we hypothesize that sex and age will interact to predict condemnation of man-older age-discrepant relationships such that younger men (Hypothesis 1a), and older women (Hypothesis 1b), will condemn these relationships more than older men, and younger women, respectively.

People may also condemn man-older age-discrepant relationships because they perceive these relationships as making the explicit exchange of short-term sexual access for desirable resources socially permissible. That is, these age-discrepant relationships may be viewed as being similar to prostitution. Short-term mating lowers the price of sex, which may be especially problematic for women's sexual strategies. Women stand to gain when the price of sex is higher, because men are "paying" (Baumister & Twenge, 2002). Indeed, women often derogate female rivals' promiscuity (Vaillancourt & Sharma, 2011). Men are more supportive of prostitution – both socially and legally – than women (Basow & Campanile, 1990), and older men are more supportive of prostitution than younger men (Sawyer, Metz, Hinds, & Brucker, 2001). We hypothesized that men more than women (Hypothesis 2), and older men more than younger men (Hypothesis 3a), will endorse prostitution. Further, because younger women have higher short-term mate value than older women (e.g., Fink & Matts, 2008), and thus are less threatened by intrasexual competition in the short-term context, we hypothesized that younger women will endorse prostitution more than older women (Hypothesis 3b).

Most individuals (younger men, and women of any age) should enforce age-based assortative, long-term pair-bonding and condemn male-older age-discrepant relationships insofar as such relationships evoke the explicit, short-term exchange of resources for sex. Indeed, these relationships are often perceived as a commodification of sex such that the women involved in them are perceived as not being "in love" but merely interested in their partner's resources (Banks & Arnold,

2001), and are derogated as "gold-diggers" (Lehmiller & Agnew, 2010). These female-directed derogations are similar to those used in female intrasexual competition (e.g., "slut", "whore"; Campbell, 2013). We hypothesized that people with more favorable attitudes toward prostitution (i.e., those who condemn prostitution less) will condemn man-older age-discrepant relationships less (Hypothesis 4), and that endorsement of prostitution will mediate the association between people's age and their condemnation of these relationships (Hypothesis 5). Because we expected women to endorse prostitution less than men, we examined whether this mediation effect differed for men and women (Hypothesis 6).

2. Method

2.1. Participants and procedure

We recruited 430 participants (221 women) from Amazon's Mechanical Turk (MTurk). We excluded responses from 29 participants from analyses because they completed the entire survey in < 15 min—an unreasonably short duration given the length of the survey ($M = 33.08$ min, $SD = 19.38$). The remaining sample comprised 211 women ($M_{age} = 37.47$ years, $SD = 12.41$) and 190 men ($M_{age} = 36.94$ years, $SD = 12.75$). We implemented MTurk filters recommended by Peer, Vosgerau, and Acquisti (2014): The only MTurk workers who could access the survey were those who successfully completed at least 500 MTurk jobs with approval ratings of at least 95% for those jobs. Participants were compensated $1.50 for their time. The study was approved by the institutional review board of the institution at which the research was conducted.

2.2. Materials

To measure moral condemnation of man-older age-discrepant relationships, participants were asked to imagine two strangers dating—an older adult man and a younger adult woman, roughly one generation apart—and then rate their reactions to this relationship on three 10-point scales: acceptability (1 = *not at all acceptable*, 10 = *extremely acceptable*), upset (1 = *not at all upsetting*, 10 = *extremely upsetting*), and disgust (1 = *not at all disgusting*, 10 = *extremely disgusting*). We constructed the composite variable *condemnation* ($α = 0.90$) from the mean of responses to these three items: upset, disgust, and acceptability (reverse-coded) of the man-older age-discrepant relationship.

Participants reported their attitudes concerning the acceptability of prostitution ($-5 = $ *not at all acceptable*, $+5 = $ *extremely acceptable*), and whether they agreed that prostitution should be legalized ($-5 = $ *completely disagree*, $+5 = $ *completely agree*). Participants also provided demographic information such as age and sex. We report analyses of a subset of the variables for which data were collected in order to test the target hypotheses. All variables from the larger dataset are available upon request.

3. Results

To test Hypotheses 1–4 and 6, we standardized the relevant variables and conducted a moderated mediation analysis (see Fig. 1) using a bootstrapping method via PROCESS for SPSS (model 8; Hayes, 2013). We included the predictor *participant's age*, the moderator *participant's sex*, the mediator *endorsement of prostitution*, and the outcome *condemnation* of man-old age-discrepant relationships. Table 1 summarizes the bootstrapping model, corresponding to Fig. 1.

Participant's sex did not predict condemnation. Participant's age was negatively associated with condemnation such that younger people condemned man-older age-discrepant relationships more than older people. Hypotheses 1a and 1b were not supported, because participant's sex and age did not interact to predict condemnation. Supporting