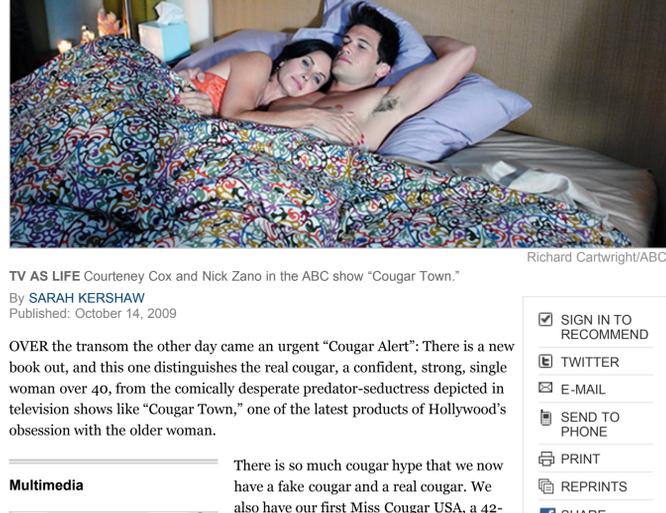


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Rethinking the Older Woman-Younger Man Relationship



TV AS LIFE Courteney Cox and Nick Zano in the ABC show "Cougar Town." By SARAH KERSHAW Published: October 14, 2009

OVER the transom the other day came an urgent "Cougar Alert": There is a new book out, and this one distinguishes the real cougar, a confident, strong, single woman over 40, from the comically desperate predator-seductress depicted in television shows like "Cougar Town," one of the latest products of Hollywood's obsession with the older woman.

Multimedia



Older Wives: Less of a Rarity

There is so much cougar hype that we now have a fake cougar and a real cougar. We also have our first Miss Cougar USA, a 42-year-old crowned in August by a room full of "cubs," men in their 20s and 30s. Cougar cruises are setting sail, cosmetic surgeons are promising to cougarize their clients and online cougar communities are cropping up.

Newsweek, taking stock of the explosion of on-screen romances between older women and younger men, declared 2009 "the year of the cougar," but then concluded in the June article that "by this time next year, the cougar will be extinct."



Andrew H. Walker/Getty Images REAL LIFE Mariah Carey, 40, and Nick Cannon, 29.

Maybe so — if you're talking about television or the box office. But behind the unleashing of cougars in pop culture is what a growing number of sociologists say is a real demographic shift, driven by new choices that women over 40 are making as they redefine the concept of a suitable mate.



Jason Merritt/Getty Images Ashton Kutcher and Demi Moore.

The loosening of relationship conventions, which is not limited to age but also includes race, religion and economic status, appears to be particularly evident among female baby boomers, sociologists say, who are faced with the tightest "marriage squeeze" — the smallest pool of compatible men as conventionally defined, those two to three years older, of similar background and higher levels of education and income. The reason is that as women have delayed marriage, men still have a tendency to date and marry younger women.

In the last several years, as the loaded term cougar was popularized by the media's frenzied fascination with Demi Moore's marriage to Ashton Kutcher, 15 years her junior, and the dalliances and liaisons of other celebrities like Madonna and Katie Couric, researchers have begun to examine the older woman-younger man relationship. It is one that has long been taboo, heavily influenced by the Freudian notion that the older women are mother substitutes or "robbing the cradle."

"For a long time we've been fed this idea that women should look for a man to take care of her, a man that is more educated, has a better job and makes more money," said Sandra L. Caron, a professor of family relations and human sexuality at the University of Maine. "That might be fine and dandy if you're in high school and have this fairy tale Prince Charming. But when you look at adult women, most are self-sufficient and they don't have to look for that."

Dr. Caron is an author of a 2006 study of couples in which the wife is at least 10 years older, which found surprisingly positive attitudes among the couples, although fear of stigma and insecurity about aging for the women, in particular, were common.

The study, published in the Journal of Couple and Relationship Therapy, reported that the couples thought their age difference mattered more to the outside world than to them, and that the men were more strongly drawn to the relationships at the start because of physical attraction.

Consistent with most other research and what many relationship experts are saying about these connections, the authors found that women liked the vitality the younger man brought into their lives, and men liked the maturity and confidence in the women, although generational differences sometimes made both partners uncomfortable. Others have also cited infidelity as a stronger possibility in any relationship with a large age difference.

"Initially I thought I would find more issues," said Nichole R. Proulx, the lead author of the study, who is a marriage and family therapist in Maine. "But it's a relationship like any other, despite what society might say. I thought I'd find that he looks at her like his mother, more inequality, more power struggles."

That study involved only eight couples, and the samples have generally been small in other research into a subject that has not until recently received much scholarly attention.

An analysis of census data on age difference in marriages showed that the number of marriages between women who are at least 5 or 10 years older than their spouses is still small, 5.4 percent and 1.3 percent, respectively. But both rates doubled between 1960 and 2007, according to Andrew A. Beveridge, a demographer at Queens College, who conducted the analysis.

At the same time, the data showed that the percentage of marriages of older men and younger women decreased steadily through 1980, and since then it has remained stable.

Sociologists say these figures reflect a solid change, if not a major shift in marriage patterns.

But marriage tells only part of the story. Researchers and relationship experts say that a growing number of men and older women are dating, or at least contemplating it. The women tend to be highly educated and have been married before and are not necessarily seeking out marriage or even cohabitation.

Another study by Dr. Caron, in 2004, comparing the dating preferences of women 35 to 50 with those of women 20 to 25, found that the older women were much more open to younger men and to crossing lines like race, religion and socioeconomic status.

Prior research, Dr. Caron said, had suggested that women of all ages were looking for the same things in a partner, research that led to the famous Newsweek cover story in 1986 that declared a single woman over 40 had a better chance of being blown up by a terrorist than marrying. That conclusion ricocheted through the culture as a defining fate for women of that age, but 20 years later the magazine issued a retraction, in an article entitled "Rethinking the Marriage Crunch."

A survey in 2003 by AARP of 2,094 older single women, 40 to 69, found that 20 percent were dating or had recently dated a man at least five years younger.

Christie Nightingale, founder of Premier Match, a matchmaking service that charges from \$6,500 to \$50,000 and has 10,000 members in its database, said she had seen a striking leap of interest among women from their early 40s to late 50s in dating men up to 15 years younger. Ms. Nightingale, 45, whose husband is five years her junior, estimated a 30 percent increase in such requests from women in the last year. She attributed it to pop culture's infatuation with May-December relationships as well as the underlying demographics.

"It's become so mainstream and accepted that a lot of people are jumping on the bandwagon," she said. But, she added, it is not always easy to persuade the men to participate.

"I have to be conscious of how many cougars I'll actually work with," she said. "If a woman is truly stunning, a really pretty woman who has a good attitude, who is hip and youthful, I can call some of these men on the fence and maybe get them to go with someone older. There are younger men who are sick and tired of women their age — they want a woman who is more grounded and more mature. Age is just a number."

It's a number that still matters a lot, though, according to research that culls information from online dating services, where men overwhelmingly say they are seeking younger women.

According to researchers at the University of Chicago and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, men "consistently dislike older women," and show a preference for women five to nine years younger. Although the study, which has not been published, showed men prefer women their own age to those more than 10 years younger.

The term cougar raises hackles among women who say the image of a wild animal, however sleek and beautiful, prowling for victims — or an army of Mrs. Robinsons on the march for men young enough to be their sons — is demeaning. Ms. Moore, who has been married to Mr. Kutcher for four years, has been described as a cougar, but so have sex-starved women slinking through bars for young men to satisfy nothing but physical needs.

According to the Urban Dictionary, which lists many definitions of cougar too unsavory to print, the cougar woman is generally at least 35 — and always on the hunt — while many of the Hollywood and tabloid depictions put the women in their 40s, 50s and even 60s. Sociologists studying these relationships generally are looking at women of those ages involved with men 10 to 15 years younger.

The older woman, if she is what some relationship experts refer to as the "Samantha prototype," a reference to the "Sex and the City" character who has a strong sexual appetite for younger men — and anyone else for that matter — may well be looking merely for a boy toy. There is plenty of research on the notion popularized by Alfred Kinsey that women reach their sexual peak much later than men do, so older women and younger men may be especially sexually compatible.

"I think men are deeply attracted to a woman who knows what it's all about and is sexually free," said Pepper Schwartz, a sociologist at the University of Washington and a sex columnist and author. "The idea of a woman who is sexually knowledgeable and passionate is very attractive to a lot of young men who are getting more hesitant interactions or conditional sexual access from younger women."

But economics is also a key factor. Both women and men, particularly as the wage gap has narrowed, are growing more comfortable with the possibility that she is the higher earner, sociologists say. And while she may not want to take a slacker under her wing, she is less likely to be focused on the status of her partner than women of previous generations.

The paradox, of course, is that the older-woman relationship makes perfect sense when it comes to life expectancy, with women outliving men by an average of five years. But with men's fertility far outlasting women's, biology makes the case for the older-man scenario, and recent research has even suggested that older men having children with younger women is a key to the survival of the human species.

Nonetheless, advice for women who want to pursue younger men abounds in an explosion of magazine articles and books dedicated to cougardom.

Linda Franklin, a former Wall Street executive who is the author of a new book, "Don't Ever Call Me Ma'am! The Real Cougar Woman Handbook" (Advantage Media Group), said she had decided to take what she thought was an insulting term and use it to empower women.

"What you see on TV in no way bears any reality to women in real life," Ms. Franklin said. "These women take very good care of themselves, they are financially independent, and they are making different choices. That certainly does not make them desperate."

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