



The Masculinist #23: Marrying Up

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Welcome back to the Masculinist, the monthly newsletter about the intersection of masculinity and Christianity. If you think this is an important topic today, then please forward this to other people you think might be interested, because I need your help to make this a success.

You can subscribe and read the archives here: <http://www.urbanophile.com/masculinist/the-masculinist-archives/>

For those of you in New York City, please email me at arenn@urbanophile.com, because I would like to be able to connect in person with readers. It has been great to meet some of you already.

I was recently on the radio program Point of View to discuss [Masc #21](#) and the landscape of modern relationships. My segment starts about 22 minutes in at [this link](#), and runs about half an hour (including a brief interlude where I got disconnected).

The Basics of Attraction

This month I'm wrapping up a four-part introduction to attraction and modern relationships. For those who are new, I'm doing this in part because the church has gotten many things wrong on this, so we need to reset to reality.

I will give a few short examples here to refresh since many people are new. On my radio program above we talked about Matt Chandler, who once [wrote](#), "I keep saying it: godliness is sexy to godly people." That's not accurate, as I detail in [Masc #17](#).

In Masc #21 I mentioned a [tweet](#) of Gospel Coalition president Don Carson saying, "The greatest aphrodisiac in marriage is kindness." This is not accurate. Kindness is a fruit of the Spirit. It's something every man should be seeking to cultivate in his relationships with everyone around him, including his wife. But the word "aphrodisiac" specifically refers to something that will generate sexual desire. Kindness does not generate sexual attraction.

And just this month Tim Keller [tweeted](#), "Friendship does not flow out of great sexual chemistry. Sexual chemistry grows out of terrific friendship." This is also not accurate.

Anyone can easily see that Chandler, Carson, and Keller are wrong with a brief reflection on the reality of modern relationships, such as the Tinder app. It's also the case that none of these are biblical statements, so in these instances those men are not acting as Bible teachers but life coaches. This happens a lot in the Christian world, and it causes many problems.

The previous installments in this series go through a lot of background and information, so please do read them.

1. Masc #17: [The Basis of Attraction](#) – my intro to this series and detail on what women find attractive in men
2. Masc #19: [Women and the Attractiveness Curve](#) – details on what men find attractive in women, and how the different drivers of attraction between women and men mature at different rates over time (which has profound implications).
3. Masc #21: [The Tragic Landscape of Modern Relationships](#) – how modernity has transformed matchmaking and marriage into a brutal marketplace.

The Hypergamy Principle

I am wrapping up this series by covering a simple but important principle of relationships: [hypergamy](#).

Hypergamy is a term that originated in reference to marriage practices in India. It refers to women marrying men of

higher social status or caste. More broadly, this term refers to women marrying up (or dating up) on various measures but especially social status.

Hypergamy broadly interpreted is a nearly universal human mating pattern and is deeply embedded into the marriage cultures of countries like India and China. In the modern West, where social classes are not rigidly defined, and women and men largely decide for themselves whom to marry, the marriage market principle that gets the most press today is called [assortative mating](#), or the tendency of people of similar social status to marry.

It's may be true that there has been a rise in assortative mating in America. A male lawyer today may be more likely to marry another lawyer than to marry his secretary compared with the 1960s. But within these assortative strata, hypergamy is still in effect. Women still tend to marry men who are [older](#), [taller](#), [make more money](#), etc. In cases where the situation is reversed, such as when the wife makes money than the husband, unhappiness and marital dysfunction often results.

Earnings in particular seem to have a big impact on marriage. A 2015 study called "[Gender Identity and Relative Income within Households](#)":

We show that the distribution of the share of income earned by the wife exhibits a sharp drop to the right of 1/2, where the wife's income exceeds the husband's income. We argue that this pattern is best explained by gender identity norms, which induce an aversion to a situation where the wife earns more than her husband. We present evidence that this aversion also impacts marriage formation, the wife's labor force participation, the wife's income conditional on working, marriage satisfaction, likelihood of divorce, and the division of home production. Within marriage markets, when a randomly chosen woman becomes more likely to earn more than a randomly chosen man, marriage rates decline. In couples where the wife's potential income is likely to exceed the husband's, the wife is less likely to be in the labor force and earns less than her potential if she does work. In couples where the wife earns more than the husband, the wife spends more time on household chores; moreover, those couples are less satisfied with their marriage and are more likely to divorce.

Another academic book [notes](#), "[T]he greater a wife's earnings relative to her husband, the worse she feels about herself as a spouse." This may be, as some argue, that this is culturally conditioned. But that doesn't make it any less true for the moment. CNBC [noted](#) that "Millennial women are 'worried,' 'ashamed' of out-earning boyfriends and husbands." And as one [New York magazine article](#) put it:

Indeed, there's little evidence to show that as women acquire financial muscle, relations between the sexes have evolved successfully to accommodate the new balance of power. Neither the newly liberated alpha women nor their shell-shocked beta spouses seem comfortable with the role reversal.

For women, the shift in economic power gives them new choices, not least among them the ability to reappraise their partner. And husbands, for their part, may find to their chagrin that being financially dependent isn't exactly a turn-on. According to psychologists (and divorce lawyers) who see couples struggling with such changes, many relationships follow the same pattern. First, the wife starts to lose respect for her husband, then he begins to feel emasculated, and then sex dwindles to a full stop.

To show how powerful this motivator is, a [brand new report](#) from the Census Bureau finds that spouses lie on their Census surveys if the wife out earns the husband, increasing the husband's actual income and reducing the wife's.

Education also seems to be important. A Brookings Institution [issue brief](#) from 2015 called "Is there a shortage of marriageable men?" notes, "Breaking down marriage markets by education reveals another surprising fact: college-educated women are those facing the greatest shortage of men. This is the result of women's rising education levels relative to men." Note the implication of this: it's assumed a college educated woman won't marry a man without a degree. She wants someone at least equal if not superior to her in education. A Christianity Today [article](#) called "How the Dating Scene Became Stacked Against Women" makes a similar assumption. (Women actually are marrying lesser educated men today, but with a 60/40 college attendance skew favoring women, it's that or go single for a lot of them).

With men and women having different measures of attractiveness, it's certainly possible for both to marry up in a sense. But my impression is that, if you reduced people's total package to a single number, such as on the classic 1-10 scale, generally women would ideally like to marry up or at least most certainly not marry down. That is, women want at a minimum an assortative match, preferably a hypergamous one.

Hypergamy Unleashed

It might seem like on the whole the hypergamy concept is not that important. After all, in a traditional society where lifelong marriage is the norm, the vast majority of people still made a good match for themselves. Some people did lose out, but overall it seemed to work well.

However, in the neoliberalized sexual marketplace I described in [Masc #21](#), things change radically. We end up, as Houellebecq observed, with relationships turned into “an extension of the domain of the struggle” in which some succeed, a few spectacularly well, but many end up losers.

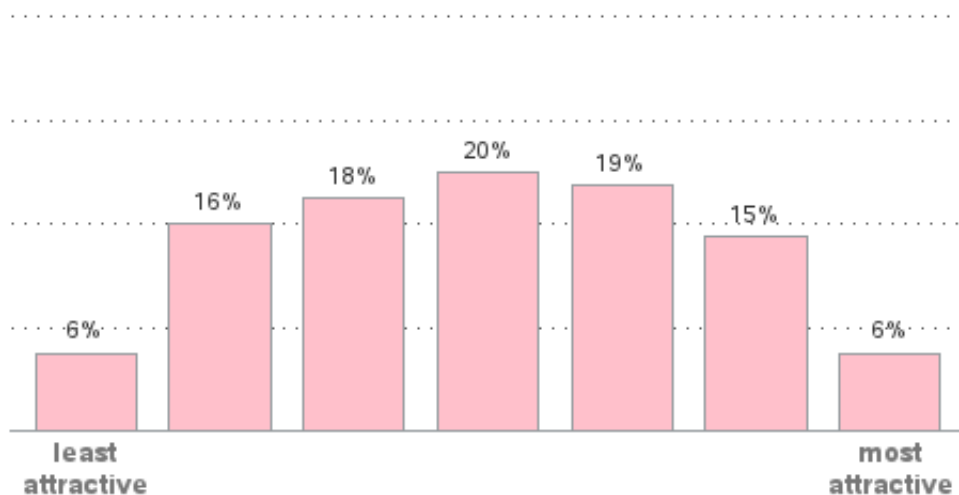
To see how hypergamy plays out in this environment, take a look at the online dating world. Back in [Masc #18](#) I highlighted research done on OK Cupid profiles showing that while the men women find most attractive scaled linearly with the woman’s own age, men of all ages find 22 year olds the most attractive.

Today I’ll show the flip side of that. What do the distributions of the actual ratings of attractiveness by men and women look like?

Robert Allison at SAS (a gold standard statistical software package), wrote [a blog post](#) examining this very question. Here is his chart for men’s ratings of women:

How Men Rate Women

on okcupid.com

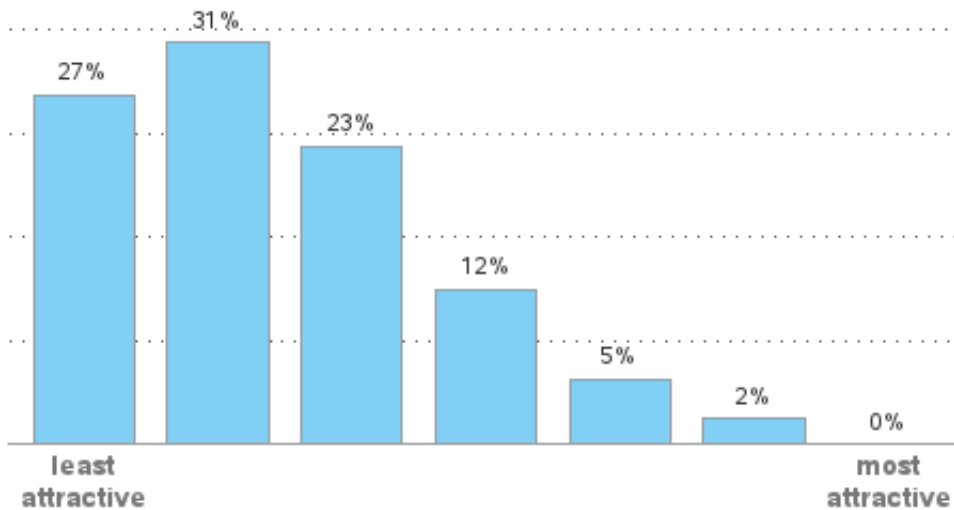


As you can see, this is essentially a normal type distribution even though it’s un-normalized data. Most men put the highest number of women in the middle rating category, with ratings tapering off evenly towards the extremes.

By contrast, here’s the chart of how women rated men’s attractiveness:

How Women Rate Men

on okcupid.com



Yikes! Women rank 81% of men below average in looks, and only 7% above average.

(As an aside, did you read Mark Regnerus' book *Cheap Sex*? If so, did you notice this information in there anywhere? I didn't, even though Regnerus devotes an entire chapter to online dating and its effects. I really don't want to give Regnerus too much grief – he gets enough of that from others already – but I recently got around to reading the book and while he uses a similar marketplace analysis to me, he has some significant problems in both leaving out some key matters like this, and also utilizes some questionable framing. While it contains a ton of good material, I would advise caution while reading).

In fairness, this analysis of OK Cupid is only one dimension. The company itself did a deeper dive in a post that they recently deleted for some reason. However, it's still [cached](#) if you'd like to read it, albeit without the graphs. Women are still sending messages to a number of these men rated below average. As the article itself quips, "the average-looking woman has convinced herself that the vast majority of males aren't good enough for her, but she then goes right out and messages them anyway." (There's a word for this: settling).

Nevertheless, in the neoliberal relationship marketplaces we live in, hypergamy operates in ways not available under the old regime. For example, in the old regime, both men and women had to content themselves with a single spousal partner. Today, where casual sex is legitimated, many women can successfully attempt to have sexual relationships with the limited number of men they rate as highly attractive. For their part, those same men can now have sex with many women. It's the same dynamic Houellebecq described and which we can see also at work in the economy.

The neoliberal marketplace also encourages people to think they can trade up. The traditional stereotypical case of this was a man dumping his wife to marry a much younger woman. Today, it's far broader than that. Look at, for example, the lesson Twitter user [@yvonnevictoriaa](#) took from the recent royal wedding. She [tweeted](#), "All my females. If Meghan never left her first marriage she wouldn't be a princess today or royalty. There is always better." This was retweeted 86,000 times and liked 308,000.

This is especially a risk for men who suffer an adverse life event that lowers their social status. For example, a 2016 [Harvard study](#) found that men who were unemployed were 33% more likely to get divorced.

But for anyone, man or woman, all relationships, including marriages of any duration, are perpetually fragile and contingent in ways that they never were before. Think it can't happen to you? Wait until something bad happens. I referenced before the case of my former pastor, who suffered traumatic brain injury and was disabled in a hit and run accident while riding a scooter. In less than two years, his wife – my pastor's high school sweetheart with whom he had five kids – had an affair then divorced him and shipped him off to live with his parents. Think he ever thought that could happen to him?

It's a grim environment in which to try to build a marriage and a family, that's for sure.

Hypergamy's Implications for You

It might not seem like the fact of hypergamy has much practical application. But it very much does.

The first is that since women want to marry up, then you need to be as good a product – remember, like it or not we are in a relationship marketplace today so we are at some level all products - as you can be, on all the dimensions of attraction I've mentioned previously. The “just be who you are” or “you do you” approach is probably not good advice; you need to be working on getting better. Some things you can't change, but others we can affect. The more attractive you can make yourself, the bigger the universe of women who will plausibly be interested in you will be.

Secondly, if you want your relationship or marriage to last, you need to stay on your game. There's no letting yourself go with a beer gut after she says, “I do” and the like. Let me be clear that not all women are ready to drop you like a hot rock if something goes wrong. But the stats around divorce and unemployment are a sobering reminder that relationship risk levels do go up as your value as a husband goes down. Keep in mind that there's a good chance she thinks you are unattractive and at some level believes she “settled” by dating or marrying you. I'll remind you again of the OK Cupid data on women's ratings above. Unless you are in the top 20% of men, women probably rate you below average in looks.

Thirdly, stop self-deprecating. If women want to marry up, then the last thing you want to do is to portray yourself as a lower status person. Yet men – including plenty of pastors – do this constantly when they cut themselves down, often publicly, relative to their wives.

Here's a simple one: how many men refer to their girlfriend or wife as “my better half”? I understand the desire men have to show honor to their partners. I'm all in favor of that. Let's by all means say great things about our women. But when you cut yourself down in the process, you send a message to her that she got duped, that you are the used car salesman who scammed her into buying a lemon. If she really is your better half, then in reality she is dating down or married down. Is that likely to make her feel good?

Similarly, I see men make glowing Facebook posts about their significant other that conclude with something like, “I'm not worthy of this woman.” These people are publicly saying that their girlfriend or wife got duped. Say that enough times and don't be surprised if she starts believing it.

It's like that old song “She's Like the Wind” by Patrick Swayze

*Feel her breath in my face
Her body close to me
Can't look in her eyes
She's out of my league
Just a fool to believe I have anything she needs*

This is precisely the wrong attitude to have.

I've also long noticed that Christian pastors reinforce this by their tendency to portray themselves as doofuses from the pulpit. Many if not most of their personal anecdotes are about something embarrassing happening to them or them doing something stupid or naïve, often told with humorous affect. I can certainly understand why they don't want to appear prideful, so I don't want to criticize this per se.

What you have to understand is that these men, who are the top of the status heap in the church, can get away with a bit of self-deprecation because of that. It's sort of like John Kerry in the 2004 presidential debate when he said, “Well, I guess the President and you and I are three examples of lucky people who married up. And some would say maybe me more so than others.” Although he married an heiress to the Heinz fortune, hence his quip about him more than the others, Kerry was a Senator and nominee for President with a lengthy record of high-level public accomplishment. So he was at the pinnacle of power and status. You are mostly likely not, so this probably not for you.

It's like back in [Masc #8](#) when I said to stop apologizing. It's one thing to apologize if you've genuinely done something wrong. But way too often we apologize for things that are ridiculous and in no way something we did wrong or should be ashamed of. For some reason, self-deprecation – and most of these apologies are a form of self-deprecation – has really seeped into the culture of men in the US. Self-deprecation can be useful and appropriate in some circumstances, but we tend to way overuse it.

Always remember, women want to date and marry up, or at least someone they see as on their level. So you reduce your value you to women when you put yourself down, and especially when you say or imply that you are below her in worth.

In the unlikely case you really are dating someone who is above your level – dating someone “out of your league” as it were – chances are that relationship will be unstable. You should think about the implications of this if things get serious.

Noteworthy

New York Times: [A French Novelist Imagined Sexual Dystopia. Now It's Arrived](#). This op-ed in the NYT is basically a reprise of exactly what I told you about Michel Houellebecq in [Masc #21](#). Remember, you read it here first.

NYT: [I'm in My 40s, Child-Free and Happy. Why Won't Anyone Believe Me?](#) Ask yourself this question: How many op-eds do newspapers run from single people in their 40s who are unhappy because they are unmarried or childless?

First Things: [Manual Manhood](#)

Coda

The sexual revolution, universally assumed to be a boon for randy men, has turned out to be in at least one respect much more conducive to satisfying women's preferences than men's. Men may have started it, or at least egged it on, hoping that with the old restraints gone, they would be free to indulge. But they forgot or never understood a fundamental law of nature: throughout the animal kingdom—up to and including *Homo sapiens*—males merely display; females choose. When a woman's choice is completely free of all social, legal, familial, and religious boundaries, she prefers to hold out for “the best.” Hence a constrained-supply problem arises.

Four years ago, a University of North Carolina co-ed lamented to the *New York Times* that the sex imbalance on college campuses (nationally, 43% male, 57% female as of fall 2014) is even worse for girls than it looks. “Out of that 40 percent, there are maybe 20 percent that we would consider, and out of those 20, 10 have girlfriends, so all the girls are fighting over that other 10 percent.”

- Michael Anton, “[Tom Wolfe: A Woman in Full](#)”

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