

Modern Romance

Blithering Genius

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1 Introduction

These days, most of us live in cities with millions of other people. We are always surrounded by members of the opposite sex. Yet, it is difficult for many people to find love. Despite the superabundance of mating possibilities, people now spend more time and energy on the mating game than ever before. Adolescence has become an almost permanent condition. Men and women spend years and years going through a cycle of casual affairs and short-term relationships.

To understand this situation, you have to understand human sexuality. Let's start with the simple observation that men and women are different. Men have stronger feelings of attraction. Women have stronger feelings of attachment. That is because men and women have different reproductive strategies. Men can have more children by having sex with multiple partners. Women cannot. Women, on the other hand, need the protection and support of men to survive and raise children. We evolved different emotions that reflect the costs and benefits of sex and commitment.

Men are more motivated toward sex. Women are more motivated toward commitment.

2 Marriage, Men, And Women

For thousands of years, human sexuality was mostly confined to marriage. Marriage was a deal that gave both sides something of value. The man got a young, fertile virgin. The woman got life-long support for her and her children. Marriage balanced the emotions of men and women. It

combined sex and commitment. It was of equal perceived value and equal biological value to both sexes.

Because men and women benefited equally from marriage, both were equally motivated to marry. Women usually married shortly after puberty. Men usually married a bit later in life, after they had acquired the means to support a family. Almost everyone got married and had children.

In modern societies, we have discarded the institution of marriage and the cultural norms about sexual behavior that went along with that institution. We still have legal marriage, but extramarital sex is socially acceptable, and divorce is common. Marriage is becoming irrelevant.

By abandoning marriage, we have split the mating game into two separate games: the sex game and the commitment game, played in that order.

The marriage market was balanced, because men and women valued the outcome equally. There was a competition within each sex for high quality mates, but supply and demand were equal. That is not true of the markets for sex and commitment. The market for sex is not balanced, because men have a greater desire for sex. Likewise, the market for commitment is not balanced, because women have a greater desire for commitment. Supply and demand are not balanced.

Each market is controlled by the side with the least desire. Women are the gatekeepers of the sex game. Men are the gatekeepers of the commitment game. Women choose when and with whom to have sex. Men choose when and with whom to commit.

Thus, female preferences determine the nature of the sex game, and male preferences determine the nature of the commitment game. It is difficult for a man to pass through the first gate, and difficult for a woman to pass through the second gate. The chance of a man and a woman making it through both gates together is low. First, men have to run the gauntlet of female sexual selection. Then women have to overcome male indifference to commitment.

The modern mating game is tragically flawed. Instead of bringing people together, it places obstacles between them.

How did things work before we had marriage? If you go back to the time before formal marriage existed, people lived in small groups where everyone knew everyone. In that world, human emotions worked just fine. People had a strong incentive to maintain good relations with each other. Formalized contracts were not necessary. You couldn't just walk away from a commitment, implicit or explicit. But today we live in a world of free association with millions of other people, most of whom are strangers to us. In the modern world, emotions are not sufficient to create cooperation between individuals.

3 The Sex Game

In the rest of this essay, I will focus on the sex game, which is the first obstacle to a relationship. The sex game is otherwise known as "romance". Women are in control of the sex game, so the sex game reflects female preferences and cognitive styles. Because it is the first game, it sets the stage for the second game.

If there is one thing that most men know about women, it is that women are crazy. Women act in ways that make no sense. Women claim to want long-term relationships, yet they select the men who make the worst candidates for such relationships. Why?

To understand this, you have to understand the basis of female sexual attraction. It boils down to one thing. Women are attracted to power.

Power can be physical or social. Women are attracted to signs of physical power, such as height, physique and vitality. Women are also attracted to a man's perceived social status, as indicated by how the man acts and how others act toward him. Of course, this includes how he acts toward her.

In the sex game, women have much more power than men, because they control the game. Ironically, this makes men even less attractive to women. As a general rule, a woman is only attracted to a man if his perceived power is equal to or greater than her own.

In the past, a man's main source of sexual power was his ability to provide for a woman and her children. In the modern world, women have less need for men. Women are now having few or no children, making the male role of provider less important. If a woman does have children, the welfare state can replace the father as provider. Feminism has encouraged women to reject traditional sex roles and place career before family. Men no longer have the same value as husbands. This means they have less power, and are thus less attractive to women.

In a sense, the modern world has emasculated men.

3.1 The Power And Attraction Feedback Loop

The female perception of male power is amplified by a feedback loop. The more powerful a man is, the more attractive he is to women. The more attractive a man is to women, the more powerful he is. Sexual attractiveness is a type of power, and women are attracted to power. Women find a man more attractive if other women find him attractive.

It works in the opposite direction too. If a man is unattractive, feedback makes him even less attractive. This divides men into two groups: alpha and beta. Feedback makes male attractiveness more of a binary distinction than a continuum. It is like a ball that can roll down either side of a hill. A small push in one direction or the other can make all the difference. Women find alpha males attractive, and beta males unattractive or even repulsive.

Female sexual attraction is contextual. A man can appear to be alpha in some contexts and beta in others. A college professor might seem sexy when he is giving a lecture, but unattractive on the street or in a bar. Men seem attractive in contexts where they display physical or social power.

In the modern world, the top 20% of men have the majority of male sexual power. Modernity has not transferred power from men to women. It has shifted the distribution of male power. In the past, most men could get married, and few men could get sex outside marriage. Today, alpha males can get sex for very little effort and no commitment, while beta males struggle to get female attention, let alone sex.

3.2 The Empathy Feedback Loop

There is another feedback loop that affects female sexual attraction: empathy.

Empathy works by mirroring the emotions of another person, based on their facial expressions. When someone smiles at you, you smile back. If they frown, you frown. You feel what they are feeling. Empathy can amplify positive or negative emotions. Smiling at someone makes them feel good, so they smile back at you, which makes you feel good. Frowning at someone makes them feel angry, so they frown back at you, which makes you angry.

When a man approaches a woman with a confident, relaxed, happy attitude, the woman will also feel confident, relaxed and happy. She mirrors his emotions. On the other hand, if a man is afraid when approaching a woman, the woman will be afraid too. This happens subconsciously.

The feedback loops of power and empathy explain why women reject “nice guys”.

Suppose that a man finds a woman very attractive. He sincerely wants a relationship with her. They flirt a bit, and she signals her interest in him. Now it's time for him to make a move and ask her out. As a normal human being, he is nervous. He knows that there is a high chance of rejection. The outcome is important to him. His face betrays his anxiety. To the woman, his fear makes him seem weak, subordinate, and thus unattractive. Even worse, the fear on his face makes her feel afraid too. All of a sudden, he seems unattractive and creepy. So, she rejects him.

3.3 The Balance Of Power Changes During Relationships

If a man falls in love with a woman, he has no game and his chances are slim. That is true even if they would make an excellent match.

After men and women get into a relationship, the balance of power changes. The man's power increases, and the woman's power decreases. Stronger female attachment gives the man power over the woman. This also makes him more attractive by the feedback loop of power. Before, he was buying her dinner and flowers. Now, she is baking him cookies. That is why women often cling to a bad relationship, rather than seek out a better mate.

If a woman chooses a man who is her equal in the sex game, he will be her superior in the commitment game. He will have plenty of other opportunities. If he can get through her gate, he can get through the gate with other women. So, he does not need her. That is the catch-22 of female selection: women select men who are unlikely to commit, and reject men who are willing to commit.

3.4 Why Women Are Terrible At Selecting Men

Women are terrible at selecting men, if the goal is a long-term relationship. They select the men who are least likely to commit. Their selection is based on instincts that don't work in the modern world. As a consequence, the modern woman has a series of short-term sexual relationships with no potential for long-term commitment. She may not choose this outcome, but it is a consequence of her choices. She may not choose the destination, but she chooses each step along the way.

Why don't women learn from experience and adjust their behavior? There are several reasons.

One is simply that the negative consequences do not immediately follow the act of selection. People tend to be short-term optimizers. The typical young woman spends much more time worrying about her appearance than thinking about how to choose a man. She seeks the short-term satisfaction of attention from men, rather than the long-term goal of a relationship.

Another reason is that people naturally trust their instincts. We have a blind spot for problems caused by our own natures. A young woman tacitly assumes that she has the ability to choose a good mate. She does not view her own emotions as an obstacle to a relationship. If she sees no good men around, she will view the problem as a lack of good men, not her own emotions.

Another reason is sample bias. Women select men who won't commit, which causes them to lower their expectations for commitment and (perversely) raise their expectations for attractiveness

to compensate. It's another vicious circle.

There is also the myth of romantic love, created by the entertainment industry. Hollywood sells us one love story after another, in which the bumbling nice guy meets the sweet, beautiful woman and wins her heart. Love is presented as something magical that just happens when it is meant to be. We are not supposed to think about it, just act on our feelings and everything will work out fine. But in reality, there are no scriptwriters to ensure a happy ending for modern romances.

Gyno-normativism is also part of the problem. In our culture, female preferences are presumed to be normative, especially when it comes to relationships. Women just want to love and be loved, right? They are the sweet, lovey-dovey sex, so whatever they choose must be the right thing. Women are encouraged to express their emotions, not question them or moderate them.

Many women (predictably) place the blame on men. Men are just not "manning up", they say. Either men are dodging commitment, or they are not making themselves attractive enough for today's wonderful women. But the truth is that female preferences are a bigger obstacle to relationships than male preferences or behavior. Women can't expect to date only the top 20% of men and get committed relationships.

It is not until women start losing their sexual power that they are willing to settle for a beta male, but by then it is often too late. After 10 to 15 years in the mating game, women are emotionally traumatized, and beta males have had their spirits crushed. Constant rejection creates bitterness between the sexes, making it harder for them to relate to each other. It's yet another vicious circle, driving men and women apart.

4 Conclusion

By abandoning traditional sex roles and norms, we broke the mating game.

It is an example of the law of unintended consequences. When you mess with something complex that you don't understand, you usually break it.

People still find ways to get together, of course, but it is harder, it takes longer, and the results are less stable. People get together in spite of romance, not because of it.

Modern romance is no romantic comedy. It is a tragedy of errors.