Sexual Creepiness

Abstract

Accusations of “sexual creepiness” seem to be on the rise. Why is this so, and are such accusations morally problematic? In this essay I will follow legal scholar Heidi Matthews in arguing that sexual creepiness (or at least the set of norms governing accusations of it) is in tension with liberal moral commitments. Liberals may, as Matthews does, maintain a principled stance and reject creepiness as a category, just as a liberal might the category of sluttiness. But the costs of abandoning sexual creepiness norms may be high. I advance the hypothesis that creepiness norms increasingly amount to a moral “exaptation.” Whereas accusations of sexual creepiness once might have been governed by more-or-less honest appraisals of ambiguous sexual threat, they are now often repurposed to control male sexual approach: first, by discouraging male suitors from approaching young women who are unlikely to be interested in them (“prefiltering”), and second, by deflecting eligible older men away from young women and towards older women (“redirection”). It is plausible that recent technology, intersecting with the collapse of traditional courtship norms and higher percentages of unattached men, has resulted in a deluge of sexual proposition aimed at young women and fewer desirable mates for unattached older women. If so, creepiness may have been recruited to reestablish important social equilibria. The ethical question liberals must wrestle with is whether these benefits justify the moral costs.

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Introduction

It is widely felt by cultural critics that accusations of sexual creepiness are on the rise. It is difficult to establish this empirically, but Google's Ngram does reveal a dramatic spike in the use of “creepy” and “creepiness” starting in 1980 and accelerating in the 2000s.¹ As there are no results for “sexually creepy” or its cognates, and as there seems to be no great increase of interest in horror literature that

¹ Google Ngram, “Creepiness”
would otherwise explain this spike, we can be confident the uptick in use of “creepiness” is referencing sexual creepiness.

There is a very small literature on creepiness in general, and even less on sexual creepiness in particular. Interest in the topic grew after psychologists Francis McAndrew and Sara Koehnke published their groundbreaking “On the Nature of Creepiness” (2016). Based on their large, international surveys of attitudes about creepiness, McAndrew and Koehnke found that certain professions (such as clown, taxidermist, sex shop owner) were particularly creepy, as were certain hobbies (e.g., collecting, especially of dolls or body parts), physical traits (greasy hair, bulging eyes, being tall and skinny), and various behaviors (steering conversations to sex, watching a person before interacting with them, avoiding eye contact). McAndrew and Koehnke conclude that the essence of creepiness is ambiguous threateningness, an analysis they feel explains why men are far more often creepy than women, why (men with) weird hobbies are creepy, why presentations that involve masked appearance incline to creepiness, and why young, reproductive-age women are more likely to categorize someone as creepy.

In some of his Psychology Today posts, McAndrew focuses on sexual creepiness in particular. For instance, in his “How to Avoid Creeping Women Out: Why is it so easy for a man to look like a creep?” McAndrew describes how his and other research finds that men are much more likely to be considered creepy. McAndrew goes on, in a passage worth quoting at length, that

[t]his makes sense. If getting crepeed out is a reaction to a potential threat, men are simply more physically dangerous to men and to women alike. However, very early in these conversations [with subjects] it became clear that for women, far more than for men, the creepiness of an individual was tied up with sex in some way. Women almost universally reported the feeling that the guy in question had some sort of sexual interest in them, and this was not perceived as harmless or flattering. The fact that women are simply at greater risk for sexual assault and that the costs of this are potentially greater for them means that they must be especially vigilant about sexual threats and hence, they are more likely to fear that a guy may not be just a creep, but a pervert as well.

The words “creep” and “pervert” are often used interchangeably, but I would like to make a distinction between them. Guys can be creepy for a variety of reasons
that are unrelated to sexuality, but I propose that a pervert is a creep who sets off alarm bells because he poses some sort of sexual threat. In other words, a pervert has sex on his mind—and it is probably sex that is unusual, deviant, and possibly dangerous. Jeffrey Dahmer, the Wisconsin man who lured young men to his house and then raped, murdered, dismembered, cooked, and ate them would be an extreme example of the kind of person I am thinking of as a “pervert.” At least part of the pervert’s creepiness may sometimes be traced to his assumption that his perverse desires are secretly shared by his potential victim.

Some men are, of course, painfully aware of how easily they can come across as creepy, and the fear of looking and sounding like a creep is the source of much of the awkwardness that many heterosexual men display when they approach women. Many women who are at a party or a singles bar may be interested in meeting men who are fun and interesting—but for their own well-being, their creep detectors need to be functioning at full capacity in these settings. This can result in the maddening irony of a man’s nervousness about being perceived as a creep—creating awkwardness in his interactions with women that may lead them to think he is creepy. Consequently, a man seeking a new romance with a woman always faces the delicate balancing act of expressing interest in her while not crossing the creep line. Some men are at greater risk than others in such situations. Good-looking men with strong social skills can typically get away with a lot more than awkward guys with unusual and less attractive physical traits.

Other demographic variables such as age and race may also play a role; the trope of the “dirty old man,” for instance, exists for a reason. It is no secret that as men age they retain an attraction toward much younger women, but at some point an age difference becomes so great that a romantic approach often tosses the man directly into the creep bin. In fact, Christian Rudder, the founder of the dating site OKCupid and the author of Dataclysm, has developed the “Standard Creepiness Rule” to help men avoid looking like creeps. In short, the rule states that the zone of non-creepiness for relationships is “half your age plus seven.” In other words, if you ignore the standard creepiness rule, you are begging to be labeled as a creep. Data from the OKCupid website confirms that the pattern of men’s searches for a romantic partner by age abides by this rule almost perfectly.\(^2\)

This passage encapsulates the morally problematic nature of sexual creepiness as a category, which is the subject of this essay. For if creepiness is ambiguous threat, and if sexual creepiness is a manifestation of creepiness in a sexual context, then sexual creepiness is ambiguous sexual threat, and by corollary McAndrew’s “creepiness detector” would be our sense that someone is an ambiguous sexual threat. Since it is normally bad to be sexually threatening, it is probably morally problematic to be ambiguously sexually threatening. Thus it’s fair to say that we have at least a weak prima facie moral obligation to avoid being creepy. Of course, we cannot control what bad judges of

\(^2\) McAndrew 2017.
creepiness will deem creepy, in parallel to how we are not responsible for the offense that overly-sensitive people might feel. But if we get a sense of what elicits reasonable judgments of sexual creepiness, we can avoid those (one might think), and should do so.

This simple train of thought is complicated by the very common mediators of creepiness that the research uncovers, however. Looking back at the McAndrew quote, we ask what ethicists—or at least consistent liberal ethicists—are to say of sexual creepiness if its realizers are things like being an older man attracted to a younger woman, or being awkward, or being direct, when such desires, traits, and actions are morally unproblematic on liberal values? How, furthermore, is the liberal ethicist going to take on board McAndrew’s category of the “pervert,” i.e., one who has “unusual, deviant, and possibly dangerous” sex on his mind? Finally, what shall we say about the evidence that this threat-detecting mechanism of “the creeps” in young women (who are overwhelmingly the demographic most likely to accuse someone—almost always a man—of being creepy) appears to be powerfully mediated by the mere attractiveness of the male in question?

These concerns are why it is not uncommon for posters in incel and manosphere communities to be creepiness skeptics, as they see “creepiness” as more-or-less a slur for unattractive men. For instance, the introduction of the “creepiness” entry on Incel Wiki states:

Contrary to the politically correct understanding of the term, creepiness is actually a judgement about ornament and other genetic dispositions, used by women as convenient, socially sanctioned means of rejection. The term is intentionally ambiguous. Women know that if they were being completely honest and said “ugly, short guys should eat dust”, they would be viewed unfavorably and shallow. Therefore, in order to blame-shift, or to covertly act like a chameleon and having a constantly moving goal-post with regards to their moral compass, an ambiguous term such as “creepy” is a welcome adjective in the chameleon's vocabulary. Ugly men are not more criminal to meaningful [sic] extent, so the failo effect [the opposite of the halo effect] misleads people into thinking ugly creepy [sic] men are more criminal.3

Even if there is a kernel of truth in it, this skeptical objection to creepiness may be too hasty. After

3 https://incels.wiki/w/Creepiness
all, even our least impeachable moral categories can be misapplied or weaponized. Imagine if for some reason accusations of injustice were, in left-handed men's mouths, mostly reserved for redhead women: in that situation, we’d grow impatient with left-handed men’s use of “injustice,” concluding that it was more reflective of a problem with left-handed men than redheads. So this consideration speaks in favor of the legitimacy of sexual creepiness as a category even if it’s been weaponized or is routinely misattributed by young women. That said, if the normative term in question—“crocky,” say—were used mostly by left-handed men, we may well grow suspicious of crockiness itself, and not merely the social norm around its invocation. But then again, maybe that demographic is sensitive to a variety of moral failing the rest of us are not? Maybe redheads are far more likely to mistreat left-handed men in a crocky way, and the rest of us don’t notice because we’re not men or we’re right-handed? Or maybe the genes for left-handedness correlate with or even are the genes that (as a realist might put it) allow one to perceive crockiness and its disproportionate representation among redhead women? All these possibilities for creepiness need to be explored in greater detail.

In this essay I will follow legal scholar Heidi Matthews in arguing that sexual creepiness (or at least the set of norms governing accusations of it) is in tension with liberal moral commitments. Partisans of creepiness may take this as evidence against liberal values. Or one may, as Matthews does, maintain a principled liberal stance and reject creepiness as a category, just as a liberal might the category of sluttiness. But there is a third possibility Matthews doesn’t consider. For it’s generally allowed that even our best moral frameworks hold only prima facie, and have requirements that may be put aside if the stakes are high enough. For instance, caging people is in obvious tension with liberal values, given that liberalism is, of all ideologies, the most committed to individual liberty and freedom of movement. But serial killers exist; and given current medical and social technologies,
lifers will tell us that no better solution than incarceration has presented itself for dealing with them.

Thus, after summarizing the liberal case against creepiness, I advance the hypothesis that there is indeed a delta between sexual creepiness itself (which might, after all, be on the increase) and emerging norms governing accusations of it. The suggestion is that these norms increasingly amount to a moral “exaptation.” In biology, exaptations are adaptive beneficial uses of a trait that evolved for another purpose—feathers, for instance, likely evolved to keep animals warm or attract mates, not for flight—and the idea that norms or even whole innate moral modules can be “recruited” for another moral purpose is familiar enough, as in the case of moral disgust, which is thought by many to have been recruited from more primitive aversions to skin disease and our disgust responses to fecal matter in scavenged meat. The idea in this case is that, whereas accusations of sexual creepiness might have been governed by more-or-less honest appraisals of ambiguous sexual threat, they are now increasingly repurposed to control male sexual approach. The norms of sexual creepiness accusations have been recruited to control male sexual approach in at least two particularly notable ways: first, by discouraging male suitors from approaching young women who are unlikely to be interested in them (which I call “prefiltering”), and second, by deflecting eligible older men away from young women and towards older women (which we’ll call “redirection”). It is plausible that recent technology, intersecting with the collapse of traditional courtship norms and increasing numbers of unattached men, has resulted in a massive increase of sexual proposition aimed at young women and fewer desirable mates for unattached older women. If so, creepiness may have been recruited to reestablish important social equilibria or prevent a certain amount of harm to women by prefiltering substandard men and redirecting older men to older women. The ethical question liberals must wrestle with, which I leave for them to answer, is whether

5 Kelly 2011.
these benefits justify the moral costs.

The liberal case against creepiness

In her deservedly viral essay “What is to be done about the Problem of Creepy Men?,” Matthews begins as I have, noting a proliferation of creepiness accusations that anyone (in the Anglosphere, at least) over 40 or so cannot help but notice.

These days, ‘creepy’ is a popular pejorative. From ‘Creepy Uncle Joe’ Biden’s hair-smelling antics to Justin Trudeau standing ‘too close’ to a tennis star, from the random dude who just slid into your direct messages to Zach Braff holding hands with a much-younger actress, many people are invoking creepiness as a factor, even a decisive one, in considerations about what is socially acceptable and even who is fit for political office. Creeps, it seems, are everywhere.

From there Matthews expresses skepticism about creepiness’ bona fides as a threat-detecting mechanism. “Conventional wisdom tells us to ‘trust our gut’, but researchers say that our gut is concerned more with regulating the boundaries of social mores than keeping us safe,” she begins.

Matthews notes that young female subjects tend to see creepiness in morally innocent qualities: e.g., being a sexually interested male with unkempt hair, having strange looks, and being between the ages of 31-50. She summarizes some laboratory experiments reported in Watt et al. (2017) that presented college-age women with pictures of faces, asking them to rate the people represented in terms of creepiness, trustworthiness, and attractiveness. In a matter of seconds, young women generally found attractive faces trustworthy and not creepy. Some of the faces were of men on the America’s Most Wanted list, and these faces were not judged to be more creepy than the faces of non-criminals.

Perhaps most damning of all, the young women reported a high degree of confidence in their judgments. As Watt and colleagues themselves conclude:

The present findings carry potential implications for the real world. For example, if the label of “creepiness” is too hastily applied to people who violate social norms, versus criminal laws, negative consequences could ensue. Once a person is labeled “creepy,” others may view them as untrustworthy, deservedly or not. Some of the features of “creepiness” (e.g., unusual eye contact, body language, inappropriate
conversation, dishevelment) are commonly associated with mental illness and may lead to stigmatizing attitudes by lay people and health care professionals alike. The way participants claimed to interact with “creepy” people (e.g., avoiding or ignoring, confronting) somewhat mirrors our interactions with people who are homeless or have been diagnosed with mental illness (e.g., social distancing). Perhaps, also like people who are homeless or have been diagnosed with mental illness, “creepy” people may be seen to pose a greater risk to others (e.g., violence) than they actually do. More research is clearly needed to more fully comprehend the implications of judging others to be “creepy.”

Matthews concludes from this that sexual creepiness is ripe for ostracizing the mentally ill, disabled, ungaily, “those with ticks or other abnormal movements or facial features, the impoverished and the homeless,” as well as “historically sexually marginalised groups: the queers, the perverts, the BDSM community, and others who find joy and meaning in the sexually experimental.”

So rather than reliably detecting danger, our internal ‘spidey sense’ often signals social difference or otherness. When we judge a situation or person creepy, we participate in shunning and social ostracism. Creepiness can prevent us from responding to the odd, the new or the peculiar with curiosity, interest and generosity of spirit.

It goes without saying that these concerns have purchase only in a liberal moral and legal regime.

Traditionalists and conservatives do not generally aspire to erase social distance, or respond to the odd, new, or peculiar with curiosity, interest, or generosity of spirit. Traditionalists and conservatives are comfortable with social hierarchy and the sexual implications of that, which would include a sort of sexual caste system in which less eligible men aspiring to more eligible women would be viewed as presumptuous and exposed to violent intervention if they made their amorous intentions plain.

Matthews’ brief against creepiness might be expanded.

First, even if (as may not be the case) the so-called “threat detector” of creepiness should prove effective, it’s still highly problematic on liberal and progressive grounds. To see why, note that black American males are about 10x more likely to murder than non-Hispanic American white males, let alone Asian-American males, who have even lower murder rates.\(^6\) Nonetheless, the liberal

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\(^6\) Watt et al. 2017, 64.
\(^7\) Steffensmeier et al., 2011.
commitment to individualism means that liberals are disinclined to endorse treating individual black men differently because of their race. To more progressive leftists, the presumption against racial profiling applies to the private as well as public realm. For instance, in an early educational video on microaggressions narrated by the professor who coined the term, a white woman choosing not to enter an elevator late at night occupied only by a young black man is given as an example of a microaggressor, which is a morally bad thing to be, at least on progressive values. So by analogy, even if creepy-looking men are an order of magnitude more likely to commit acts of sexual misconduct, the liberal or at least progressive moral advice is to adopt a procedurally non-judgmental posture until some actual misconduct arises (the progressive is especially wary of prejudgment when the target is socially worse-positioned, as those tagged with being creepy usually are). In short, there is no morally acceptable work for a “threat-detecting” creepiness mechanism to do, even if it worked.

Second, creepiness, or at least the way accusations of it are deployed, is sexist on some liberal and maybe even progressive understandings of what sexism amounts to. If a sufficient condition of sexism is that it has a disparate impact on a sex, then obviously creepiness is sexist, akin to how anti-promiscuity norms are thought to be sexist by liberals insofar as they are imposed on women but not men. If “inequity” is unjust, as it is treated in some progressive quarters with regard to, say, racial representation in the prisons, then, as men are vastly overrepresented among the “creepy,” creepiness or at least its deployment is sexist. Again, this might not concern the traditionalist or conservative, who is comfortable with different gender roles and expectations and thus gender-typical failings, but it is more problematic for liberals and progressives, who are not.

Third, as gestured at but not emphasized in Matthews’ essay is that, perhaps from a liberal

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8 E.g., Kennedy 1999, Morgensen 2019.
9 Sue 2010.
perspective more than a progressive one,\textsuperscript{10} creepiness accusations are problematically ageist. The liberal sex ethic is as age-blind as it is sex-, gender-, or colorblind: what matters is that the individuals involved are informed and consent. Liberals are especially likely to condemn third-party accusations of creepiness: former model and columnist Ulrika Jonsson might not want to date Leonardo DiCaprio if she were as young as his girlfriends,\textsuperscript{11} but what moral force can her accusations of DiCaprio as creepy carry when his girlfriends clearly do not agree, and his continued attentions are not unwanted?

Digging a bit deeper, creepiness is decidedly “sex negative.” Creepy men, as long as they are being creepy, are to-be-avoided, especially sexually. This is hardly sex-positive: the sex-positive position is that although you should never be forced to have sex with someone you don’t fancy, sex is a good and it’s good for people to find willing partners, analogous to the goodness of people having access to nutritious food or clean water. Sex-positivity celebrates sexual diversity, kinks, and strange attractions, and thus the sex-positive reflex applied to whatever natural properties underlie your creepiness evaluation is to wish the creepy individual luck in finding someone who finds those properties attractive.

Nor, in practice at least, is sexual creepiness liberal with regard to its inegalitarianism and anti-market implications. Liberals are egalitarians, at least as far as entry into the market is concerned: they don’t believe a potential sex partner or mate should be ruled out ex ante because of their social status, for instance. Some even argue that it’s illiberal to rule potential partners out because of their sex or gender, and that we should consider all comers and evaluate them on a case-by-case basis. (The progressive might even see a problem if your case-by-case decisions reveal a disconcerting inequity in your choices—too many partners of one sex, or one race, for example.) Yet

\textsuperscript{10} My sense is that progressives more than liberals are inclined to worry see exploitation and even coercion in relationships in which there is a wealth- or power-imbalance, and thus tend to be more morally suspicious than liberals about May-December romances, which typically involve an older, wealthy man with a younger, poorer woman.

\textsuperscript{11} Jonsson 2013.
perhaps the most common trigger for creepiness accusations is men approaching women “out of their league.” In an article entitled “What Makes a Guy Creepy? 24 Signs & Types of Men Girls Should Avoid” on the site LovePanky, whose readership is probably overwhelmingly young women, we see a representative illustration of creepiness’ inegalitarianism.

13. Unrealistic expectations or entitlement toward women

There is an understanding in life that most people date others who are within their own league. In other words, a supermodel would not date an ugly guy. So, if a guy thinks he can have any woman he wants *and he's not attractive* [sic] then that is creepy. He has a sense of entitlement and thinks he can have anyone he wants—but it’s not true. 

Sifting through the prevarications, inconsistencies, and qualifiers, the point seems to be that it’s creepiness-making for a man—no matter his behavior or how polite he is—to approach a woman out of his league. The liberal response to this would be that there are no “leagues.” Or, if there are, leagues are formed by individual choices, which involve in part rejected advances men have every right to make. By analogy, Hyundai cars may not be in the millionaire’s league, but that is because Hyundai cars are rejected by millionaires, and Hyundai has every right to continue to market itself to millionaires if it wishes to. On liberal grounds if I’m ugly and want a beautiful woman, I have a right to (as the kids say) “shoot my shot,” and the targets of my advances have the right to decline. If I’m polite, my advances deserve to be dismissed in a manner that isn't insulting or reputation-damaging as an ambiguous sexual threat.

Thus the liberal case against sexual creepiness (or at least the set of norms governing accusations of it) is that it is lookist, ageist, sexist, inegalitarian, sex-negative, neuronormative, and vanillanormative. 

Conservatives and traditionalists are not necessarily going to find this list of charges problematic. But to it we add a final social cost that liberals and progressives should worry about, although it doesn't offend against their sensibilities uniquely. And that is that the proliferation

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12 Serai, n.d.
of creepiness-finding is toxifying an already troubled dating market. Being accused of creepiness, directly or to others, is costly to a man’s reputation. There is no good data on this question that I can find, but one dating coach’s survey, in a convenience sample of 2000 American men, found that “69% say fear of being labeled “creepy” impacts how they interact with women” and “44% say fear of being labeled ‘creepy’ reduces the likelihood they interact with women, romantically or otherwise.”¹⁴ These numbers square with my own conversations with young men and students in my sex ethics course. Many young men I speak to moderate their mating effort out of fear of being called creepy, and seem disinclined to continue courtship if their first efforts are met with less than enthusiastic responses. Moreover, one needn’t be much of a psychologist to hypothesize that more conscientious men are probably the most affected in this manner, which is worrisome, given that conscientiousness is highly a beneficial trait for societies.¹⁵ Conscientiousness is (like any major personality trait) about 50% heritable, and insofar as it is learned in childhood, conscientious fathers are probably more likely to instill this trait in their children than fathers low in conscientiousness. We should be concerned about any social practice that discourages highly conscientious men, who are the most likely to be stable mates and responsible fathers, from finding mates.

**The social exaptation hypothesis**

So liberals and progressives (perhaps for not all the same reasons) should be skeptical about creepiness or its current deployment. If creepiness (the category or the emerging norms around its accusations) is easily jettisoned, then presumably liberals should recommend that it go the way of sluttness and miscegenation. But what if creepiness is serving some valuable social function, or at least valuable social function for some group that would otherwise suffer disproportionately? Here I gesture at a case for thinking this might be so. My thoughts here are speculative and go far past the

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¹⁴ BusinessWire 2022.

¹⁵ Wikipedia, “Conscientiousness.”
available evidence, and I do not assert them so much as float them as hypotheses interested social scientists might explore.

Recent decades have seen the advent and adoption of online dating apps and social media platforms. For some, especially young women, these apps and platforms result in a level of mating interest and monetizable attention previously enjoyed only by on-screen actresses. Young women understandably see advantages in the prospects for attention and wealth these technologies provide, and reasonably value the chance to connect with much better men than they would otherwise meet in real life. Unfortunately, these same platforms inundate young women with unwanted attention from their admirers. The low-cost and semi-anonymous nature of dating apps and social media incentivize men, who are more likely to be seeking casual sex, to be sexually provocative more often and more quickly than most female users would prefer. To some degree this is a deliberate strategy: even if it means missing out on some potential sexual partners, it is a more efficient use of a man looking for casual sex to weed out women who would require more courtship. But to some degree the boorish behavior is probably unconscious: what psychologists call “male overperception bias” often causes males to overestimate their attractiveness, which is probably adaptive because it minimizes missed mating opportunities, but could translate to men honestly mistaking how far “out of their league” the targets of their advances really are. The net effect is that young women on dating apps and social media are faced with wholly unprecedented amounts of unwanted sexual proposition. Even young women who aren’t using these technologies will usually report receipt of unsolicited “dick pics” from men they barely know.

A second stressor for young women in this regard is the increased number of unmarried and polyamorous married middle-aged and older men. In the last two decades, the percentage of unmarried American men increased about a third, from about 30% to 40%. Nearly twice as many

\[16\] Vieux 2020.
\[17\] Fry and Parker 2021.
young men (63%) than women (34%) report not being in relationships.\textsuperscript{18} And an increasing percentage of people, especially men and especially younger generations of men, are in and want to be in non-monogamous relationships.\textsuperscript{19} These factors translate to more men on the mating market, and, given men’s abiding sexual interest in young women \textit{whatever} the men's age,\textsuperscript{20} more pressure on young women from not only young men, but older men, and even married men. Influential research suggests that a major driver of the particularly strict patriarchal norms (early marriage, chaperone culture, bride price) in polygamous cultures is the fact that every man, unmarried \textit{and} married, is on the mating market, meaning young women are subject to greater mating interest.\textsuperscript{21} It may be that a parallel scramble for young women is forming because a larger-than-ever share of men are either unmarried or married but still on the market.

Liberal sex norms have also probably subjected young women to increased sexual proposition. Except for prostitutes, traditional societies usually safeguard young women from male sexual proposition in a variety of ways, such as expecting female chastity outside of marriage (and enforcing this—at the extreme, with honor killings), channeling suitors to parents, chaperoning, and beating men who don’t mind their manners. But on liberal sex norms, sex is in principle no different than any other sort of exchange or activity: as one very popular sex educator puts it, a good model for sexual proposal are our norms around proposing to share a pizza.\textsuperscript{22} A highly liberal sexual marketplace is a highly unregulated sexual marketplace, and one can no more expect sexually interested people not to advertise their interest than one can expect stores not to advertise their wares. It hasn’t escaped the notice of defenders of free-markets that street hawking should (prima facie) be protected on their view,\textsuperscript{23} and the sexual analogy to this would be, inter alia, catcalling,

\begin{thebibliography}{99}
\bibitem{18} Gelles-Watnick 2023.
\bibitem{19} Ballard 2020.
\bibitem{20} Pinker 2021.
\bibitem{21} Henrich et al. 2012, 663.
\bibitem{22} Vernacchio 2013.
\bibitem{23} Emozozo 2017.
\end{thebibliography}
unsolicited dick pics, and other forms of sexual proposition that are often going to get one called a “creep.”

It would benefit young women, then, for a norm to be propagated that discouraged substandard suitors from approaching in the first place. Polite rejection of substandard suitors is very costly timewise, but even ignoring unwanted messages or comeons adds up psychologically. If more men reserved their approaches for women “in their league” or for those they have a serious chance at, this self-censorship would be highly beneficial for young women, or at least appear so (setting aside above concerns about creepiness norms weeding out highly conscientious men).

On this hypothesis, sexual creepiness norms cleverly recruit a preexisting aversive category (creepiness), and repurpose it as a prefilter on behalf of young women. Recruiting an existing norm for this task is easier than creating a new one out of whole cloth. The population is already used to condemning creepiness, so nudging the realizers of what gets called “creepy” is not that difficult. Much as how older generations have different attitudes about what constitutes racism, older generations are likely to interpret offhand comments about so-and-so’s being “creepy” differently than their younger counterparts do; and unless such offhand comments are interrogated frequently, the shift in meaning will go unnoticed for quite some time. It is especially beneficial to recruit an existing norm if your new one runs counter to widely-held values. Suppose race-conscious policies and attitudes are deemed racist, and suppose you demur. You can coin a term “shmracist” for colorblind norms and try to persuade the old guard that what they call “racism” is sometimes okay but in fact it’s shmracism that’s wrong. But this would be difficult—you’d be called a racist, which is bad for you because the old norms are still dominant. Better to just use “racism” in a slightly but increasingly novel way, and let the younger generations adopt the new usage and the new norms that go along with it. Likewise, the plainly illiberal norms governing accusations of creepiness would get much less traction in a liberal setting if a new term was devised to discourage men from making
sexual advances to women “out of their league” or (of-age) women who are in fact quite receptive but substantially younger. In contrast, calling these behaviors “creepy” will draw suspicion down upon such men for no good liberal reason and your misuse of the term will fly under the radar for some time. Eventually people catch on, articles calling for a “national conversation” about what counts as creepiness (racism, etc.) will be written, polls revealing a generational divide will be published, and the youngsters will call the oldsters racist and creepy.

The concept-creep of creepiness with regard to age gaps, at least, has been noticed. French author Max O’Reill argued in 1901 that the ideal age gap for a bride and groom is when the bride is seven years plus half the groom’s age.24 It is unclear when this rule of thumb, originally meant to delineate the perfect compromise of youth and compatibility for marriage, became known as the “standard creepiness rule” marking the furthest limits of non-creepiness, but that term for it was widely popularized in a blog post by data analyst Randal Olson in 2014, in response to confirming evidence from OKCupid data reported in Christian Rudder’s 2014 Dataclysm. In any event, it is widely appreciated among culture watchers that age gaps are increasingly problematic25 and, as we have seen, that norm is increasingly policed with the language of creepiness.

To some degree, the perennial phenomenon of older men pursuing younger women now being deemed creepy is explainable by prefiling, since a large chunk of these older suitors will be substandard. Prefiling doesn’t easily explain, however, why successful older suitors are increasingly called “creepy,” even though the objects of their affections apparently do not agree. But it may be that accusers reason that such relationships are purely mercenary: there is some empirical evidence that women who are more accepting of sex work are more accepting of May-December romances, and so it may be that women who condemn such romances do so because they find men who

pursue prostitutes to be creepy.\textsuperscript{26} And it may be that much of the condemnation of johns is driven by the (quite unreliable) inference that a man will only hire a prostitute if he cannot find a willing partner, meaning he is substandard, meaning that a man in a May-December romance is actually a substandard suitor who has compensated with his wealth. It is also possible that women who find men in such partnerships creepy do so because they see them as too weak to deal with a woman their own age, and thus forced to younger, more naive women they can more easily control, which again marks them as substandard and thus creepy.

These possibilities acknowledged, it isn’t difficult to imagine a norm developing to militate against the same social and technological changes described above, which freed men up to pursue young women. It would benefit older women to have more suitors, as they likely would if men of their cohort felt ashamed to pursue young women (and, for good measure, prostitutes). One might think that, for intrasexual competition reasons, on this hypothesis older women will be more likely to deem “creepy” older men pursuing younger women. The only recent and relevant research I know, which doesn’t appeal to creepiness per se but the “acceptability” and the “disgustingness” of May-December coupling, did not find that older women were more critical of men pursuing younger women than younger women were.\textsuperscript{27} But then again, it may be that those women who do find age gaps creepy are unconsciously motivated by different self-serving reasons: for young women, creepiness norms would be good because they keep old men away (prefiltering), and for older women, because it redirects older men to them. Obviously, more research is needed to explain, if sexual creepiness = ambiguous sexual threat, why “third party” accusations of creepiness aimed at men in successful May-December romances aren’t laughed out of court. That these accusations reflect an exaptation of a female-driven norm in response to harms stemming from social and technological change is just one possible hypothesis.

\textsuperscript{26} Sela et al. 2018.
\textsuperscript{27} Sela et al. 2018.
Conclusion

Supposing we are witnessing in real-time the exaptation of a moral norm: that sexual creepiness, once referring to those (almost exclusively men) who posed an ambiguous sexual threat, is increasingly used to discourage substandard men from approaching women out of their league and older men from pursuing younger women who might well be receptive. What shall we say of this new sexual more? Traditionalists and conservatives are likely to be skeptical of creepiness 2.0, of course. Insofar as the new norms around creepiness are meant to solve a problem, it’s a problem that emerged in no small part because the liberal sex ethic replaced their traditional safeguards for women. The interesting question is what liberals and (if we wish to disambiguate) progressives will say of the moral legitimacy of creepiness 2.0. As I have argued, following Matthews, it seems to contradict their overarching moral commitments. However, if the new creepiness norm serves an important social good, it may be considered worthwhile by liberals, all things considered. What needs to be considered is whether, even if the effects of creepiness 2.0 are necessary, some other sexual more that is more consonant with liberal or progressive values couldn’t do the same work.

For suppose that fat shaming turned out to be a convenient, and highly motivating, way to address the health crisis. Suppose we could effectively discourage obesity by getting people to see themselves as “fat pigs” whenever they indulge. Even if fat shaming turned out to be—and it may turn out to be—the best way to militate against the grave social ills caused by the intersection of our evolved appetites and developments in food technology, the evils involved would have to be very evil indeed, and the alternative motivators quite psychologically remote and weak, for the liberal and especially progressive mind to tolerate a fat shaming norm in circles and institutions under their control (imagine TED talks and Psychology Today blogs full of scientific insights, inspiring traditional wisdom, and life hacks in the service of not being a “fat ass”). That said, the mating, marriage, and
reproductive crises are real and dire. Liberal and progressive critics of sexual creepiness must do more than merely complain about the norm’s incongruity with their values. They must also suggest an alternative norm that is less stigmatizing but still serves women—and society—in the necessary ways.

References


