Sexual Creepiness

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Accusations of sexual creepiness are on the rise, but are such accusations morally problematic? Legal scholar Heidi Matthews thinks so, arguing that sexual creepiness as a category is in tension with liberal and progressive moral commitments. Principled liberals and progressives can reject creepiness as a category, but the costs of abandoning sexual creepiness may be high. Empirical findings about who gets accused of being creepy suggest that the creepiness norm is being repurposed to control male sexual advances in two ways: first, by discouraging substandard male suitors from approaching young women unlikely to be interested in them ("prefiltration"), and second, by deflecting eligible older men away from young women and towards older women ("redirection"). If something like this hypothesis is correct, the ethical question liberals and progressives must wrestle with is whether these benefits justify maintenance of a norm that is (inter alia) lookist, ageist, sexist, sex-negative, and neuronormative.

Key words: Creepiness; the creeps; sex ethics; mating markets; liberal sex ethics; disability and sex

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Introduction: against naïve realism about accusations of sexual creepiness

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 reveals 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 gothic horror literature that would otherwise explain it, we can be confident the spike in creepiness-talk is about sexual creepiness.

[1] Google Ngram.

There is only a small literature on creepiness in general, and even less on sexual creepiness in particular.[2] Philosopher David Livingstone Smith helpfully diagnoses two traditions of analysis.[3] The first, with the older pedigree reaching back at least to turn-of-the-century psychiatrist Ernst Jentsch, focuses on the not-quite-rightness of the creepy. Smith calls this view "category ambiguity theory" (CAT), and it does a good job of accounting for certain paradigmatically creepy things, such as ambiguously living objects (robots, wax figures, zombies) falling within the "uncanny valley." But the more dominant view today seems to be what Smith calls "threat ambiguity theory" (TAT), which is clearly represented in psychologists Francis McAndrew and Sara Koehnke's groundbreaking "On the Nature of Creepiness" (2016). For McAndrew and Koehnke, being "creeped out" is probably "an evolved adaptive emotional response to ambiguity about the presence of a threat that enables us to maintain vigilance during times of uncertainty."

What are the implications of McAndrew and Koehnke's analysis of creepiness for sex ethics? Presumably, if creepiness is ambiguous threateningness, and if sexual creepiness is a manifestation of creepiness in a sexual context, then sexual creepiness is ambiguous *sexual* threateningness. Since it is normally bad to be sexually threatening, it is morally problematic to be *ambiguously* sexually threatening. (Just imagine being told by your supervisor or department chair that a co-worker or student has described your behavior as creepy. Wouldn't this concern you? Wouldn't your first reaction be to feel bad about yourself for having violated some legitimate social expectation?) Thus, on this line of thought we have at least a weak prima facie moral obligation to avoid being creepy. Of course, we cannot control what bad judges of 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, and should do so.

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[2] See Bernstein and Nolan 2024, Fischer and Fredericks 2020, Mann 2012, and McClure 2019.
[3] Smith 2016.

I call this the *naïve realist* view of creepiness: realist, insofar as it takes creepiness to be morally legitimate, but naïve, insofar as it is insufficiently leavened by skepticism about creepiness. For this earnest train of thought is complicated by empirical research on what predictably elicits "the creeps." In their large and international study, McAndrew and Koehnke asked subjects to appraise the creepiness of various behaviors, occupations, and hobbies selected to test their hypotheses that creepiness is about uncertainty about threat (and thus responsive to unpredictable behavior) and that women would be more likely to see the creepy as sexually threatening. They found that 95% of respondents (male and female) agreed that males are more likely to be creepy than females. Females connected creepiness to sexual interest more than men did by assuming more often that creepy people were interested in sex with them and that certain behaviors, such as "steering a conversation toward sex," were creepy. Of the occupations they could choose from, subjects found clown, taxidermist, sex shop owner, and funeral director to be creepiest. Traits and behaviors that seemed particularly creepy included having unkempt hair, odd or dirty clothes, baggy or bulging eyes, greasy hair, very pale skin, long fingers, flattened expression, and a propensity for unpredictable laughter or licking one's lips. Watching someone before talking to them is creepy, as is touching an interlocutor frequently, or asking for details about their family. In open-ended questions about which hobbies are creepy, hobbies that involved collecting (dolls, insects, or body parts) stood out, as did to a lesser extent observational hobbies, such as taking pictures (especially of children) and even birdwatching. In sum, McAndrew and Koehnke conclude that the essence of creepiness is ambiguous threateningness in large part because they feel it 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—the most common target of sexual assault—are most likely to categorize someone as creepy.

But is it *morally* bad to do or be these things? We learn that being a janitor is significantly creepier than being a meteorologist, but who would say it's more morally problematic to be a janitor than a meteorologist? Is it even prima facie bad to be a birdwatcher? And it goes without saying that one isn't blameworthy for having traits one cannot change, such as being a tall, long-fingered white male. It *may* be understandable to feel vaguely threatened by individuals who fall in certain dangerous demographics. But creepiness doesn't really track dangerousness, either. Being pale is hardly very predictive of dangerousness as far as skin color correlates with violent sexual assault,[4] nor, as some creepiness researchers note, are slim men as violent as muscular men.[5] This is not surprising: psychologists of creepiness sometimes make the subtle and important point that "the creeps" appears *not* to be triggered by direct threat (say, a gun being pointed at you) or even slight but unambiguous threats (say, hearing a shootout a few doors down the street), but rather, as noted above, quite literally and strictly ambiguous threats, or situations in which one cannot tell if someone is a threat at all.[6] Recalling Smith's Category Ambiguity Theory above, psychologists Margo Watt and colleagues note that

> [McAndrew and Koehnke's] findings also fit with the suggestion that "creepiness" arises from ambiguity or lack of clear meaning in a potential threat. Ambiguity impedes the encoding of a threat stimulus as either malicious or benign, friend or foe [...] "[C]reepiness" may reside in between the unknowing and the fear . . ..[7]

If this is correct, then the closest thing to naïve realism that one could reasonably argue for is that, insofar as it is in our control (which it largely is not), we have a prima facie obligation to make sure we are not only non-threatening, but *unambiguously* non-threatening—a highly attenuated moral responsibility indeed. So we mustn't be naïve about creepiness: although we have good prudential

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[4] FBI 2019.
[5] Watt et al. 2017: 59.
[6] McAndrew and Koehnke 2016: 10.
[7] Watt et al. 2017: 58.

reasons not to come off as creepy, a lot of creepy ways of being and behaviors aren't morally wrong, and even those that could signal dangerousness do so in a manner that don't seem to ground a significantly weighty moral obligation to avoid them.

Reasons for skepticism about sexual creepiness

It may be that we shouldn't just be *unconcerned* with accusations of sexual creepiness, but view the accusations themselves as morally problematic. For instance, in his 2017 *Psychology Today* blog post "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. In a passage worth quoting at length, he explains why "this makes sense":

> If getting creeped 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.
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> 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.
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> 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.
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> 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.[8]

This passage encapsulates the morally problematic nature of sexual creepiness. It is highly gendered, with accusations of it typically directed at middle-aged men by younger women. It is lookist, insofar as unattractive men are especially likely targets, while attractive or socially adept men get away with behaviors that would otherwise be deemed creepy. Accusations of it are triggered by unusual sexual tastes. The category discourages even well-intentioned men from approaching women out of fear of coming off as creepy.

These latter concerns especially are why it is not uncommon for posters in incel and manosphere communities to be what we'll call *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 blameshift, 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 [i.e., the opposite of the halo effect] misleads people into thinking ~~ugly~~ creepy [sic] men are more criminal.[9]

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[8] McAndrew 2017.

[9] IncelWiki, "Creepiness."

Even if there should prove to be a kernel of truth to the incel complaint, creepiness skepticism may be too hasty. After 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 redheaded women. Such an event wouldn't raise doubts in our minds about justice as a moral category. Rather, we'd grow impatient with how left-handed men used the term "injustice," concluding that it reflected some sort of animus they bore towards redheads. This consideration speaks in favor of the legitimacy of sexual creepiness as a category even if it's routinely misattributed or weaponized by young women against men they find unattractive.

That conceded, it's also true that if a normative term—"crocky," say—were overwhelmingly used by left-handed men and usually employed to criticize red-headed women, we would probably grow suspicious of crockiness itself. If "creepy" is most commonly used by young women to disparage men with certain traits and behaviors we think are morally innocent, then presumably repudiating creepiness is the only rational course of action, in parallel to how many readers have excised "sluttiness" from their vocabulary on the grounds that promiscuity is morally unproblematic and picking on female promiscuity in particular is sexist. Nor will it do to insist that the morally dubious accusations are just misuses of the term. Use determines meaning. So if a large-enough majority of creepiness-accusations are targeted at people whose only fault is being unattractive in certain ways, then being unattractive in one of those ways constitutes being a creep, rendering creepiness itself an illegitimate moral category.

The liberal and progressive case for creepiness skepticism

The problem with sexual creepiness is especially pointed for liberals and progressives. What are liberal or progressive ethicists 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 (with nuances to be discussed below) generally thought to be morally unproblematic on liberal and progressive values? How, furthermore, are liberal or progressive ethicists 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, given that liberals and progressives are distinctive for their tolerance and even celebration of unusual, deviant, or even dangerous sex, as long as it's consensual? Finally, what shall we say about the evidence that this alleged threat-detecting mechanism of "the creeps" in young women appears to be powerfully mediated by the mere attractiveness of the male in question?

Indeed, the most prominent creepiness skeptic is not an incel or manosphere critic but respected legal scholar Heidi Matthews, who bases her skepticism on creepiness' incompatibility with liberal and progressive values. In her deservedly viral essay "What is to be Done about the Problem of Creepy Men?" (2019), 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 women are more likely to label someone as creepy, and that 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 (note that men of this age are not more

likely to be sexually violent).[10] She summarizes some laboratory experiments reported in Watt et al. (2017) that presented college students with pictures of faces, asking them to rate the people represented in terms of creepiness, trustworthiness, and attractiveness. Some of the faces were of men on the *America's Most Wanted* list, and these faces were not judged to be creepier than the faces of non-criminals—in fact, much of what explained whether a face was judged creepy was mere unattractiveness.[11] Matthews concludes from this that sexual creepiness is ripe for ostracizing the mentally ill, disabled, ungainly, "those with ticks [sic] 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" (recall McAndrew's cautions about "perverts" quoted above).[12] "So rather than reliably detecting danger, our internal 'spidey sense' often signals social difference or otherness," Matthews writes. "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 would be worth briefly expanding on Matthews' complaints. For one thing, even if the so-called "threat detector" of creepiness should prove reliable enough to help women stay safer in a modern environment, it's still highly problematic on liberal or at least progressive grounds. To see why, note that black American males are about ten times more likely to murder than non-Hispanic American white males, let alone Asian-American males, who have even lower murder rates.[13] Nonetheless, the liberal commitment to individualism means that liberals are disinclined to endorse

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[10] In the U.S. at least, female victims of sexual assault or rape who file reports claim their assailants have a median age of 30. See DOJ 2013.
[11] Watt et al. 2017: 64.
[12] See Fischer and Fredericks 2020, who give what may be considered a revisionary analysis of creepiness in order to avoid neuronormativity.
[13] Steffensmeier et al. 2011.

treating individual black men differently because of their race, at least as far as (say) policing goes.[14] To more progressive leftists, the presumption against racial profiling applies to the private realm as well. For instance, in an early educational video on microaggressions narrated by the professor who coined the term, a vignette about 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 microaggression, which is a morally bad thing on progressive values.[15] So by extension, even if creepy-looking men are an order of magnitude more likely than non-creepy men 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 as creepy usually are). True, our appearances are themselves to some degree performances, and we certainly can signal threateningness with our appearance (say, in the form of a swastika or gang tattoo), but such signals are a far cry from sorts of creepiness elicitors enumerated above, which as we discussed do not signal threat so much as give mixed signals about being a possible threat. In short, a consistent application of liberal or progressive values would say there is no morally acceptable work for a "threat-detecting" creepiness mechanism to do, even if creepiness is about threat and not, as Matthews contends, at least as much about patrolling morally arbitrary social expectations.

Second, creepiness 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 (sluttiness) norms are thought to be sexist by liberals and progressives insofar as they are imposed on women but not men. If "inequity" is unjust, as it is thought to be in some progressive quarters with regard to, say, racial representation

[14] Kennedy 1999, Morgensen 2019.
[15] Sue 2010: 1:49ff.

in prisons, then, as men are vastly overrepresented among the creepy, creepiness is sexist. Again, this might not concern traditionalists or conservatives, who are comfortable with different gender roles and expectations and thus gender-typical failings, but it is more problematic for liberals and progressives, who are less so.

Third, perhaps from a liberal perspective more than a progressive one, creepiness accusations are problematically ageist.[16] 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 question the endemic ageism of creepiness-talk as it's quite often third party. For instance, former model and columnist Ulrika Jonsson might not want to date Leonardo DiCaprio if she were as young as his girlfriends,[17] but what moral force can her creepiness accusations about DiCaprio carry when the targets of his affections clearly do not agree?

Nor 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 evaluate all comers 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 race,[18] or even one sex,[19] for example.) Yet 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*,

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[16] 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. I discuss May-December romances in more detail below.

[17] Jonsson 2013,

[18] Abbate 2022.

[19] Higgins 2005.

whose readership is probably overwhelmingly young women, we see a representative illustration of creepiness' lookism.

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.[20]

Sifting through the prevarications, inconsistencies, and qualifiers in this passage, the point seems to be that it's creepy for a man 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 should be 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—Hyundai nevertheless retains every right to continue to market itself to millionaires if it wishes to. Likewise, on liberal grounds if Jack is unattractive and wants to date a beautiful woman, it is not problematic for him to (as the kids say) "shoot his shot," and the targets of his advances have the right to decline. If he is polite, his advances deserve to be dismissed in a manner that isn't insulting or reputation-damaging.

So to sum up Matthews' objections and my supplementation to them, the liberal and progressive case against sexual creepiness is that it is lookist, ageist, sexist, sex-negative, neuronormative, and (if I may be forgiven for the term) vanillanormative.[21] It goes without saying that these concerns have purchase only in liberal or progressive moral regimes. Traditionalists and conservatives do not generally aspire to erase social distance,[22] or respond to the odd, new, or

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[20] Serai, n.d.

[21] UrbanDictionary, "Vanillanormative."

[22] Conservatives are generally friendlier to hierarchy within the group and exclusion of those outside the ingroup. See e.g., Clifton 2023; Stewart and Morris 2021.

peculiar with curiosity, interest, or generosity of spirit.[23] It is in traditionalist and conservative quarters where we'll find discourse proudly judging the motives and interior qualities of people based on their physiognomy. Traditionalists and conservatives are more comfortable with social hierarchy and the sexual implications of that, which would include viewing less eligible men aspiring to more eligible women as presumptuous.

But to the above complaints we add a final social cost that *all* of us might worry about, liberal or conservative, and that is how the proliferation of creepiness-normativity is toxifying an already troubled dating market. Being accused of creepiness 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."[24] These numbers square with McAndrew's concerns in the long quote above as well as my own conversations with young men and students in my sex ethics course. Many young men I speak to significantly curtail their mating effort out of fear of being creepy, and they are less inclined than my Gen X cohort was to continue courtship if their very first efforts are met with less than immediate, unambiguous success. Although some readers will see nothing wrong with this because of their allegiance to affirmative- and enthusiastic-consent models of sex ethics, "playing hard to get" is a valued mating script for young women in many cultures, and this script might benefit women (in short, it helps their negotiating power not to seem desperate or overly receptive).[25] Moreover, conscientious men are more likely to dread being deemed creepy. Since, like every other major personality trait, conscientiousness is about 50%

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[23] Conservatives, though more conscientious, are consistently lower in trait openness. See De Neve 2015.

[24] *BusinessWire* 2022.

[25] Playing hard-to-get has been seen as adaptive since Darwin and this hypothesis found support in e.g., Birnbaum et al. and Jonason and Li 2013.

heritable,[26] and insofar as it's environmentally-explained it's learned mostly in childhood, conscientious fathers are probably more likely to instill this trait in their children than fathers low in conscientiousness. Since conscientiousness is a highly beneficial trait for societies,[27] we should be concerned about any social practice that selects against conscientious men, who are the most likely to be stable mates and responsible fathers.

The social exaptation hypothesis of sexual creepiness

Matthews' case for (what we can call) *creepiness abolitionism* is based on her creepiness skepticism. But we must be careful about abolishing norms we're skeptical of. Before liberals and progressives abolish the social norms justified by creepiness, they need to consider whether creepiness norms are doing some valuable work that (all-told) morally justifies their influence in our moral economy—an application of the precautionary principle of Chesterton's Fence, which one author summarizes as so:

> Chesterton's Fence is an argument against hasty abolition of laws, institutions, or customs, courtesy of G. K. Chesterton. Chesterton imagines someone coming across a fence in a field for which he sees no point or purpose. A reckless reformer might say "Well, I don't see any purpose being served by this fence, so we might as well tear it down." This is folly, says Chesterton. If you don't see the point of something, that doesn't provide a justification to eliminate it—it only shows the limits of your understanding. After all, the fences don't grow in fields like plants—someone put it there for a reason. If you don't know why the fence was built in the first place, maybe it's there for a good reason.[28]

The wisdom and urgency of this precautionary principle is amplified in cases where the mysterious norm is proliferating. If it's foolish to pull down an *old* fence you see no reason for, it's even more foolish to pull down a *new* fence you see no use for. Likewise, especially because accusations and concern about sexual creepiness are on the rise, liberals and progressives need to be especially

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[26] According to the recent Takahashi 2021, conscientiousness may be as high as 70% heritable.
[27] Wilmot and Ones 2019.
[28] Corcoran 2022.

thoughtful about whether sexual creepiness norms are serving some good purpose before they call to abolish them.

As moral fictionalism demonstrates, it is perfectly possible to be non-abolitionist about a norm one doesn't believe in. Roughly, moral fictionalism treats norms "as if" they reflected some objective moral reality, and allows us to invoke norms we don't consider strictly-speaking obligatory or at least not obligatory for the reasons they claim to be.[29] Most moral fictionalists adopt the view because they are skeptical about morality *tout court*. But it isn't implausible that we should be fictionalists about certain norms even if we are realists about others. In fact, such "localized" moral fictionalism should be less controversial than "global" moral fictionalism, since on the former one can ground a prohibition on φ-ing (an action widely condemned because it's F) not on the disvalue of F-ness itself (which you don't believe in), but on the disvalue of G-ness (which you do believe in). For instance, an atheist may come to believe that religiosity is unavoidable for most people and necessary to safe and stable societies, and thus accept or even support sin-normativity in her culture for that reason. Or consider how a philosopher skeptical about free will or moral responsibility might endorse social or legal norms that assume these things because such norms appear necessary for social order, at least for now.[30]

But is there any analogous benefit to the creepiness norm? In this section I advance the hypothesis that there is indeed a delta between sexual creepiness qua "ambiguous sexual threateningness" (which might, after all, be on the rise too) and emerging norms governing accusations of creepiness, norms that 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 to attract mates, and only later were selected for

[29] Joyce 2011.
[30] Smilansky 2000.

flight. The idea that non-moral norms or even whole innate psychological modules can be exapted for moral normativity 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.[31] Some argue that even morality itself is a social exaptation.[32]

The hypothesis in the present case is that sexual creepiness has been recruited to control male sexual approach in at least two particularly notable ways: first, by discouraging male suitors from courting young women who are unlikely to be interested in them (*prefiltration*), 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 sharp increase of sexual proposition aimed at young women and a correspondingly steep decline in desirable mates for unattached older women. If so, creepiness may have been recruited to reestablish important social equilibria by prefiltering substandard men and redirecting eligible older men to older women. The ethical question liberals and progressives must wrestle with is whether these benefits justify the moral costs, and whether there are other possible, accessible, and more compatible norms that would do enough of the same work.

Creepiness norms as prefiltration

Recent decades have seen the advent and adoption of online dating apps and social media platforms. For some, and most of whom are young women, these apps and platforms result in a level of mating interest and monetizable attention previously enjoyed only by Hollywood celebrities. Young women understandably see advantages in the prospects for attention and wealth these technologies provide,

[31] Rozin et al. 2008, Kelly 2011.
[32] Arvan 2021.

and reasonably value the chance to connect with more attractive men than they would otherwise meet in the smaller ambit afforded by their physical lives. Unfortunately, these very platforms also inundate young women with unwanted attention from admirers.

Meanwhile, the low-cost and semi-anonymous nature of dating apps and social media incentivizes 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. For many men this is a deliberate strategy: even if it means missing out on some potential sexual partners who demand more courtship, it is a more efficient use of a man's time when looking for casual sex to weed out women who have such requirements (significantly, one popular essay calls men pursuing this strategy "negligent creeps."[33] 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 also translates to honest mistakes about who's in their league.[34] 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 percentage 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%.[35] Nearly twice as many young men (63%) than women (34%) report being single.[36] And an increasing percentage of people,

[33] Banks 2023.
[34] Vieux 2020.
[35] Fry and Parker 2021.
[36] Gelles-Watnick 2023.

especially younger generations of men, are in and seek non-monogamous relationships.[37] These factors translate to a higher percentage of men on the mating market, and, given that men of all ages are most sexually interested in young women,[38] 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 in such cultures every man, unmarried *and* married, is on the mating market, meaning young women are subject to greater mating interest.[39] It may be that a parallel "scramble" for young women is forming in nominally monogamous societies because a larger-than-ever share of men are either unmarried or married but still looking for mates.[40]

Liberal sex norms also have probably subjected young women to increased sexual proposition. Setting aside prostitutes, traditional societies safeguarded young women from excessive male sexual approach in a variety of ways. They often expect female chastity outside of marriage (and enforce this—at the extreme—with honor killings), which in turn makes "respectable" women unappealing targets for men interested only in sex. They usually channel suitors through parents. They often require young women to be chaperoned. Men who don't mind their manners may be beaten by anyone witnessing the affront, and are likely subjects of vengeance from male family members of the offended woman. But on liberal sex norms, sex can be "just sex" and is in principle no different than any other sort of exchange or activity[41] (one popular sex educator argues that sexual advances should imitate the norms of proposing to share a pizza).[42] A highly liberal sexual

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[37] Ballard 2020.

[38] According to Pinker 2021, men of all ages prefer women in their young twenties for short-term mating (i.e., just sex), but not for long-term relationships, for which point the 50%+7 rule (discussed above and again below) applies.

[39] Henrich et al. 2012: 663.

[40] [redacted]

[41] Goldman 1977.

[42] Vernacchio 2013.

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 in a free market. It hasn't escaped the notice of defenders of free markets that street hawking is prima facie acceptable on their view,[43] and the sexual analogy to this would be, inter alia, catcalling, unsolicited dick pics (analogous, perhaps, to robocalls), and other forms of sexual proposition that are often going to get one called a "creep."

Faced with so much unwanted sexual attention, it would benefit young women 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, and even ignoring unwanted messages or come-ons adds up psychologically. If more men reserved their approaches for women "in their league"—i.e., for women they have a serious chance at—this self-censorship would be highly beneficial for young women.

Creepiness norms as redirection

The concept-creep of creepiness with regard to age gaps seems to have been more noticed. French author Max O'Rell 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.[44] It is unclear when this rule of thumb, originally meant to delineate the perfect compromise of youth and compatibility for marriage in brides, became known as the "standard creepiness rule" marking the furthest limits of non-creepiness that men must not dip below, 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

[43] Emozozo 2017.
[44] Dictionary.com 2017.

problematic[45] and, as we have seen in the long quote from McAndrew above, that norm is increasingly policed with the language of creepiness.

To some degree, that the perennial phenomenon of older men pursuing younger women is now being deemed creepy may be explained by prefiltering. After all, a large chunk of these older suitors will be substandard insofar as they are no match for young women in their most sexually desirable years. Prefiltering doesn't as easily explain, however, why *successful* older suitors are increasingly called "creepy," even though the younger women they date or marry apparently do not agree. Call these "third-party accusations." Nonetheless, one prefiltering explanation for third-party accusations might go as so. There is some empirical evidence that women who are more accepting of May-December romances are also more accepting of sex work,[46] and so it may be that women who *condemn* such romances do so because they find men willing to pay for sex to some extent creepy: *if* you think for whatever reason that wealth isn't truly constitutive of mate quality, and *if* you think (correctly) that May-December romances are rare when the man is not far wealthier, then the inference will be that a successful Mr. December is creepy because he compensated for his low mate quality (relative to the youthful Ms. May) with money. A second possible strategy for explaining third-party condemnations of successful May-December pairings via prefiltration is that it may be that women who find men in such partnerships creepy do so because they see such men as too weak to deal with women their own age, and forced to resort to younger, less-experienced women they can more easily control, which again marks them as substandard in the critic's mind, and thus creepy.

But these reductions of redirection to prefiltration acknowledged, it isn't difficult to imagine a norm developing to militate against the same social and technological changes described above,

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[45] Greig 2020.
[46] Sela et al. 2018.

which freed up men of all ages to pursue young women. It would benefit older women to have more suitors, as they likely would if men their ages felt ashamed to pursue young women (and, for good measure, prostitutes). Sure, pundits calling Leonardo DiCaprio "creepy" is unlikely to have any effect on the movie star's behavior, but it very well might give local, less elite men pause, and influence who they ask out for dates. Thus, for straightforward intrasexual competition reasons, on this hypothesis older women would be more likely to deem "creepy" eligible older men pursuing, and even attracting, younger women.[47] The only recent and relevant research I know of bearing on this question, which doesn't appeal to creepiness per se but rather 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.[48] But then again, it may be that those women who *do* find age gaps problematic are motivated by different self-serving reasons, depending on their age: for young women, anti-May-December creepiness norms might be desirable because they discourage approach from old men, who are mostly undesirable to them (prefiltration), whereas for older women a stigma against such relationships would be good because they leave more eligible older men for them (redirection).

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 in liberal societies. 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.

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[47] Fisher 2022.
[48] Sela et al. 2018.

Why creepiness?

But why is creepiness doing this work? Plausibly, as we have seen in our discussion of naïve realism about creepiness, part of the answer is that creepiness connotes to many ambiguous sexual threateningness. Sexual norms that had no or even more distant connections to danger (sluttiness, miscegenation, lewdness, rakishness, heteronormativity, shrewishness, frigidity, perversion, seductiveness) were discredited by sexual liberation and thus were rendered useless for stigmatizing approaches from (relatively) substandard men or May-December romances.

But insofar as "creepiness" is used to condemn actions that were previously licit (e.g., May-December romances) or should be acceptable according to liberalism (e.g., approaches from substandard men), why not coin a new name for the new norm? The answer, I think, is because recruiting an existing norm is usually easier than creating a new one out of whole cloth. It is especially beneficial for reformers to recruit an existing norm if their new one runs counter to other, widely held values. Consider an analogy with "racism." We know that there is a generational divide about what constitutes racism: race-conscious policies are usually seen as racist among the old but acceptable and indeed antiracist among the young.[49] Suppose you are a young reformer and approve of race-conscious policies. You can coin a new term, "shmracism," that (inter alia) condemns colorblind norms and try to persuade the old guard that the race-conscious policies they call "racist" are actually okay and 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 increasingly novel ways, and let the younger generations adopt the new usage and the new norms that go along with it. Likewise, the plainly illiberal and regressive norms governing accusations of creepiness would get much less traction in a liberal setting if reformers devised a new term to

[49] Toraif et al. 2023.

discourage men from making sexual advances to women "out of their league" or women who are in fact receptive but significantly younger. In contrast, calling men who transgress reformers' new norm "creepy" achieves the desired stigmatizing effect, and the reformer's use of the term will fly under the radar while it gradually catches hold in their spheres of influence. Eventually people catch on, op-eds calling for a "national conversation" about what counts as creepiness (racism) are written, polls revealing a generational divide on creepiness (racism) are published, and the youngsters will call the oldsters creepy (racist).[50] This process usually won't be planned or done consciously. Yet, as with many cases of adaptation, the end result will appear that way and using the language of design to describe it will seem natural.

Conclusion: should we maintain creepiness norms?

I have suggested that sexual creepiness is, proportionately at least, decreasingly a matter of recognizing and alerting others to ambiguous sexual threats and increasingly about disparaging men for the purposes of (inter alia) prefiltration and redirection. What shall we say of such a development, morally speaking?

Traditionalists and conservatives might be fine with creepiness insofar as it responds to ambiguous sexual threateningness. Conservatives and traditional peoples do not scruple against stereotyping and stigmatizing dangerous demographics nearly as much as liberals and progressives do, so they are more likely to accept norms that protect women from those associated with sexual violence even if those norms result in a multitude of false positives, and they might even tolerate norms demanding that men be unambiguously non-threatening.[51] With regard to creepiness accusations being about prefiltration and redirection, whether a traditionalist or conservative will see

[50] Asare 2020.
[51] Haselton and Buss 2000.

any problem with those uses depends on the tradition in question. My sense is that most traditionalists and conservatives would welcome a prefiltering norm, but prefer one redounding to the long-term interests of young women as seen from the perspective of their parents, not one that served the short-term mating aims of young women themselves. With regard to redirection, conservative and traditional societies do seem to find it socially desirable to see most women married,[52] so this might speak in favor of redirection in monogamous cultures[53] where a high percentage of women are single. Then again, traditional societies are not usually opposed to large age gaps between grooms and brides, so theoretically the vast majority of women could be married, but to significantly older men. Whatever the case, insofar as the new norms around creepiness are meant to militate against undo amounts of sexual attention being focused on young women, the conservative or traditionalist *monogamist* is prone to point out that it's a problem that emerged in no small part because their traditional safeguards for women, condemned for being patriarchal or irrationally spiritualizing "plain sex," were replaced.

That noted, the audiences of this essay are not traditionalists and conservatives, but liberals and progressives. And the central purpose of this essay is to motivate, not answer, the problem of creepiness for those with these moral-political orientations. But here's one strategy they may take up.

"Yes, culture wars frequently see widely-shared values or norms being 'weaponized' for the political or moral goals of a smaller group. Yes, empirically, the usual target of sexual creepiness accusations are traits and behaviors that are morally unproblematic on our values. Yes, it's plausible that accusers have weaponized our traditional vigilance of creeps for their benefit. And yes, if the story ended there, creepiness abolitionism would be warranted. But the story does not end there. *For*

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[52] Polygamous societies, which historically over 80% of cultures have been, prove that traditional societies are not as interested in finding mates for men as they are finding mates for women.

[53] Obviously, in a polygamous culture it's theoretically possible for all women to be married without any redirection norm, since older men may take multiple wives.

there are offensive and defensive uses of weapons, and so too of weaponized norms, and the introduction of liberal sexual norms, along with various social and technological developments, have left young women exposed to intolerably high levels of sexual proposition. Just as a person might reach for any heavy object readily at hand if attacked in their home, young women have unconsciously reached for what is, admittedly, an illiberal sexual norm. Despite creepiness' illiberality, we should maintain it (i.e., employ creepiness-talk fictionally), because the good it does all-told justifies it."

Although I am sympathetic to this line of argument, it's also true that even defensive uses of weapons are limited by considerations of proportionality, necessity, and risk to bystanders, and by analogy so too our use of weaponized norms. Liberal and progressive creepiness fictionalists must ask themselves whether some *other* sexual more that's more consonant with liberal or progressive values couldn't do enough of the same work. For suppose that fat shaming turned out to be a convenient, and highly motivating, way to address the obesity crisis. Even if fat shaming turned out to be the best way to militate against the social ills caused by the mismatch of our evolved appetites and the modern food environment, the evils of obesity would have to be very evil indeed, and the alternative motivators extraordinarily psychologically remote and weak, for the average liberal and especially progressive to tolerate a fat shaming norm in circles and institutions under their control. That said, the harms prefiltering and redirection would serve to obviate may be considerable. If they are, then liberal and progressive critics of sexual creepiness, such as Heidi Matthews, must do more than note its incongruity with their values. They must also suggest alternatives that are less immorally stigmatizing but still serve women in the necessary ways.

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