Exploring cougar territory: A qualitative examination of mature women’s aging experiences while in long-term relationships with younger men

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BACKGROUND

Psychosocial Aging

• Aging is more than physiological change, and includes important psychosocial aspects.1
• Positive and negative age stereotypes impact health- and behaviour-related outcomes. Negative age stereotypes have a greater impact than positive ones.2-4
• New concepts of aging are emerging, such as the cougar phenomenon.

Cougar Phenomenon

• A “cougar” is a colloquial term used to describe an older/middle-aged woman who has romantic relationships with a relatively younger man.5,6
• Term is predominantly perceived with negative or mixed connotations (i.e., predators, aggressors); however, positive connotations are identified (i.e., embracing women’s sexuality).6
• Cougars are an interesting group as they counteract a

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1. What are the positive and/or negative aspects of the term “cougar” in regards to older women dating younger men?

2. What are the perceptions and experiences of aging within intimate long-term relationships between mature woman and younger men?

METHODS

Participants & Recruitment

• Inclusion Criteria: Females who are, or have been, in a relationship with a younger man (broadly defined).
• Purposeful snowball sampling: Online recruitment on two cougar dating websites and on Reddit.

Data Collection & Analysis

• Qualitative: One-on-one, semi-structured, interview with three participants.
• Interviews: Conducted over the phone or by Skype.
• Audio recordings: Transcribed verbatim and thematic analysis done through constant comparison method.

RESULTS

Participants

Table 1. Participant characteristics.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Location</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Partners Age</th>
<th>Relationship</th>
<th>“Cougar” Perception</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>P1 Sydney, Australia</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>35*</td>
<td>Open</td>
<td>Negative</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P2 California, USA</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>29*</td>
<td>Monogamous</td>
<td>Positive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P3 Kanchanaburi, Thailand</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>Monogamous</td>
<td>Negative</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: *Previous experience dating other younger male partners.

Research Question 1: Cougars

• Cougar: Defined as an older woman who pursues a younger man (P1, P2, P3).

• Positive: Women taking agency over their sexuality (P2); older women being desired provides hope to younger women worried about aging (P2); men may enjoy being approached by women (P1).

• Negative: Women preying on younger men (P3); aggressive (P1, P2); hardened and bitter (P1); wearing heavy makeup (P1, P2); smokes cigarettes (P1); dressing overly sexy (P1, P2).

Research Question 2: Aging Experiences

Aging:

• “It’s scary because I feel that our society places so much emphasis on women’s youth and beauty. I’m scared about aging... I’m scared about becoming irrelevant” (P2).

• “He looked probably even younger than 30, and I felt quite weird. He would always want to take me to bars, with young people... I felt funny, and really looking around I don’t think people were looking at us; but, I felt like they might” (P1).

• “The first time I was aware of aging was when I was 29 surrounded by teenage athletes at a Muay Thai gym” (P2).

• “It’s tough... you still feel the same inside and then you see your body changing... It’s kind of surprising” (P3).

Relationship:

• “The Thai are lighthearted and very accepting of our relationship... I’m not sure how it would be if we lived overseas” (P3).

• “I look at all these young men who are just like, ‘I just really want to date a cougar’... Then, I’m like, ‘oh there is still hope! People won’t just dismiss me when I’m older’” (P2).

• “I think it’s important to have friends across the generations” (P2).

• “I’ve been surprised that the younger men that I’ve gone out with have seemed to be attracted to me, you know, physically and stuff. That’s something that... I think you always worry about, no matter what your age is or not” (P1).

REFERENCES