

## “HEY BIG BOY!”:

### CHARACTERISTICS OF WOMEN WHO INITIATE INTIMATE RELATIONSHIPS WITH MEN

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#### ABSTRACT

*Analysis of survey data from 692 undergraduate women at a large southeastern university revealed 10 statistically significant differences between the almost 40% who had asked a new guy to go out compared to those who had not. Characteristics of these “relationship initiators” included those who did not believe in there being only one true love, who had experienced love at first sight, who had used the Internet to look for a new partner, who did not view themselves as religious, who had non traditional sexual values, and who would cohabit with a partner before marriage. Initiators were also more likely to be white and reported that they had been faithful in previous relationships, had not been involved in a “friends with benefits” relationship, and had used a form of birth control (other than withdrawal) the last time they had intercourse. Implicit theories of relationships is the theoretical framework used to interpret the data. Implications and limitations of the data are suggested.*

Mae West, film actress of the 30s/40s, is remembered for being very forward with men. Two classic phrases of hers are: “Is that a pistol in your pocket or are you glad to see me?” and, “Why don’t you come up and see me sometime, I’m home every night?”

As a woman who went after what she wanted, West was not alone - then or now. There have always been women not bound by traditional gender role restrictions. This study focused on women who initiated intimate relationships with men - women who, like Mae West, ventured beyond the traditional gender role expectations of the passive female.

#### Review of Literature

Previous research on nontraditional

women has focused attention on their presence in nontraditional career development and career choices. Educational tracks, such as engineering, mathematics, and physical sciences, have been typically male-dominated and gender segregated (Robinson and McIlwee, 1991). Increasingly, women have crossed gender role boundaries into non-typical educational tracks rather than taking the feminine track of nursing, teaching, or library sciences. Nontraditional women have also crossed gender boundaries into male-dominated occupations that are stereotyped as masculine, specifically hard-hat careers (Martin, 1997). With the help of affirmative action policies, women today perform nontraditional work as coal miners (Moore, 1996),

construction workers (Eisenberg, 1998), steel workers (Fonow, 1993), tractor-truck drivers (Lembright and Reimer, 1982), subway conductors (Swerdlow, 1989), firefighters (MacLean, 119; Yoder and Aniakudo, 1997), and harness-horse track racing jockies (Larsen, 2006). Women in nontraditional educational tracks and careers demonstrate that they are not bound by traditional gender roles and experience life actively rather than passively. In time and as women gain more social, political, economic, and reproductive freedom, non-traditional women will become more visible in public and private domains.

Research specific to relationship initiation has been organized around three types of close relationships: friendships, romantic relationships, and marriage. Initiation of friendship and initiation of dating relationships for adults depend on what the friendship and romance means to the individual (Leone and Hawkins 2006) Researchers have consistently found that mate selection for marriage or cohabitation initiation depends on attraction similarity and personality characteristics (Buss, 1985; Leone and Hawkins, 2006). Individuals' self-monitoring propensities is another factor identified as influencing intimate relationship initiation (Snyder, Berscheid and Glick 1985).

How does romantic relationship initiation differ for men and women? In line with common sense and traditional norms, men are, typically, more active and direct at initiating

romantic relationships (Guynn, Brooks and Spencer, 2008; Clark, Shaver, and Abrahams, 1999) and sexual intimacy (Byers and Heinlein, 1989) than women. Contrary to this norm, Seal and Ehrhardt (2002) found that men are sometimes approached by women for courtship, romance, and sex.

### **Implicit Theories- Relationships as Growth or Destiny**

Beyond friendship and/or romance, attraction similarity, personality characteristics and traditional norms, initiating relationships depends on one's belief in relationships as growth or belief in relationships as destiny. One type of knowledge structure for how romantic relationships develop that has received little attention from researchers is the construct of implicit theories (Knee, 1998). The study of implicit theories has a long history in psychology and demonstrates how "people's basic assumptions about themselves and their world" guide their behavior (Dweck, 1996: 69). Implicit theories differentiate between the belief that attributes are grown or malleable (incremental theorists) and the belief that attributes are destined or fixed (entity theorists). Applied to relationship development, implicit theories differentiate between an individual who believes that relationships grow (depend on someone to initiate) and an individual who believes that relationships are destined (happen by themselves).

A belief in growth is that

relationships are cultivated or shaped by individuals over time and that one can experience multiple "true loves" over his or her lifetime. In opposition, a belief in destiny is that relationships are either meant to be or not meant to be and that there is only one "true love." Prior research on implicit theories has focused mostly on and successfully explained causation of intelligence (Spinath, Reimann, and Angleitner, 2003), motivation (Dweck and Leggett, 1988; Dweck, Chiu and Hong, 1995b), judgments and reactions (Dweck, Chiu and Hong, 1995a), evaluative processes (Hong, Chiu, Dweck, and Sacks, 1997), social morality (Chiu, Dweck, Tong, and Fu, 1997), shyness (Beer, 2002), and achievement (Dweck, 1991, 1996) situations.

Knee (1998) tested romantic relationship initiation, coping and longevity with the belief in growth and the belief in destiny. The study found that those who believed in destiny were less likely to use coping strategies whereas those who believed in growth were more likely to employ relationship-maintenance coping strategies. When gender was factored into the analysis, women displayed characteristics of both growth believers and destiny believers. For instance, women were more strongly associated with belief in growth in terms of relationship-maintenance coping strategies and also were more strongly associated with belief in destiny by being the one responsible for ending the relationship

because they felt that the relationship from the beginning was wrong (Knee, 1998).

Missing from the literature on implicit theories is how it can be used to explain romantic relationship development and specifically, the characteristics of those who initiate relationships. What are the characteristics of women who believe that relationships develop as a result of growth? What are the characteristics of women who believe that relationships develop as a result of destiny?

Do women always fit neatly into this binary classification of relationship development beliefs? The purpose of this research was to fill the literature gap on which type of women, growth believers or destiny believers, are more likely to initiate romantic relationships.

### **Sample and Methodology**

The data for this study on women who initiate relationships were taken from a larger nonrandom sample of 1027 undergraduates at a large southeastern university who answered a 100 item questionnaire (approved by the Institutional Review Board of the university) on "Sexual Attitudes and Behaviors of College Students".

Respondents completed the questionnaire anonymously (the researcher was not in the room when the questionnaire was completed and no identifying information or codes allowed the researcher to know the identity of the respondents). The term "completed" is in quotation marks since some respondents did not

respond to all questions. The result was 692 usable questionnaires from women who answered "yes" or "no" to the question, "I have asked a new guy to go out with me" - a nontraditional gender role behavior. The focus of this research was to explore the association between the independent variables and the dependent variable. Because of our interests in association, we conducted bivariate analysis rather than multivariate analysis.

To analyze the data, cross-classification was used to determine any relationships with Chi Square utilized to assess statistical significance. This is an appropriate method for detecting statistical significance because we meet the requirements of having categorical variables and a large sample size (e.g., 100 or more) (Knoke, Bohrnstedt, and Mee, 2002).

Racial background of the 692 women revealed 80.8% whites and 19.2% blacks (respondent self-identified as African-American Black, African Black or Caribbean Black). The median age of the women in the sample was 19. Over half (50.7%) were first year students, 24.6% sophomores, 14.6% juniors, and 10.0% were seniors. In regard to current relationship, over half (50.8%) were emotionally involved with one person, 26% were not dating and not involved with anyone, 17.4% were casually dating different people, 3.3% were engaged, and 2.5% were married.

## Findings and Discussion

Almost forty percent (39.1%) of the 692 women surveyed reported that they had asked a new guy out on a date; 60.9% had not done so. Analysis of the data revealed ten statistically significant findings in regard to the characteristics of those women who had initiated a relationship with a man and those who had not done so. (see Table 1).

### 1. *NON-BELIEVER IN "ONE TRUE LOVE."*

While romantics believe that there is only one person with whom they can fall in love and be happy with during their life, realists view such a belief as nonsense. In contrast, realists believe that there are an unlimited number of people with whom one can have an intense and fulfilling love relationship. Over forty percent (42.3%) of the women in this sample who asked men out reported that they did not believe in "one true love" in contrast to 31.7% who believed in one true love - a statistically significant difference ( $p < .01$ ). These women who initiated relationships with men felt that there is a menu of men from which to choose and that any one of them could result in an enjoyable, adventurous, loving, enduring relationship. In reference to implicit theory, those women who did not believe in one true love (growth believers or realists) were more likely to initiate romantic relationships than destiny believers-romantics. The growth believing women believed that there are numerous men out there for the

**Table 1 Women Who Initiate Relationships with Men by Significant Characteristics**

<b>Initiate Relationship?</b>	<b>Yes</b>	<b>No</b>	<b>Total</b>	<b><math>\chi^2</math></b>	<b>Significance</b>
Non-Believer in "One True Love"	42.3%	57.7%	100%	6.777	$p < .01$
Experienced "Love at First Sight"	51.8%	48.2%	100%	17.645	$p < .001$
Searched for Partner on Internet	54.2%	45.8%	100%	6.83	$p < .001$
Non-Religious	52.2%	47.8%	100%	7.613	$p < .05$
Non-Traditional Sexual Values	44.0%	56.0%	100%	8.717	$p < .01$
Open to Cohabitation	44.6%	55.4%	100%	20.402	$p < .001$
Caucasian	41.4%	58.6%	100%	7.336	$p < .05$
Sexually Faithful	44.5%	55.5%	100%	5.926	$p < .01$
Involvement in "Friends with Benefits" Relationship	47.6%	52.4%	100%	19.584	$p < .001$
Used Birth Control Last Intercourse	44.6%	55.4%	100%	2.497	$p < .05$

(N = 692)

picking.

## 2. EXPERIENCED "LOVE AT FIRST SIGHT."

While the women in this study who asked men out were realists about love in that they felt there were numerous loves a person could have in a lifetime, they were romantics or destiny believers when it came to their own experience about the notion of love at first sight. Over half (51.8%) of those who asked a man out had experienced falling in love at first sight in contrast to 33.4% who had not had this experience- a statistically significant difference ( $p < .001$ ). Hence, women who let a man know they were interested in him were likely to have already had a "sighting" of a man they fell in love with. One interpretation of these data

is that some of the women who initiated relationships with men were being driven by love feelings that had already developed in them- love at first sight. These are destiny believers who have their radar on for the next man they are destined to meet. And they leave nothing to chance- they go up and say, "Hey, Big Boy...."

## 3. INTERNET PARTNER SEARCHERS.

Only a small number (59 of 692 or 8.5%) of women reported that they had searched for a partner using the Internet. However, over half (54.2%) of those who had done so (in contrast to only 37.5% who had not used the Internet to search for a partner) report-

ed that they had asked a man to go out ( $p < .001$ ). Since both seeking a partner on the Internet and asking a new partner to go out verbally are reflective of nontraditional gender role behavior, these women were intent on moving the relationship forward rather than waiting for the man to make the first move. Our finding is consistent with other research on women and men who initiate dating relationships using the Internet. According to a study on users of an online computer matchmaking service, women were more likely than men to report starting a romantic relationship through the matchmaking system (Scharlott and Christ, 1995). Other findings indicate that women used the Internet for finding romantic partners because it allowed them to be more assertive (Lawson and Leck, 2006) and teenage girls reported that Internet dating appealed to them because it allowed them to be aggressive (Clark, 1998). The perk of Internet dating for many women is the removal of typical gender norms that constrain women from being assertive because society deems it 'un-lady-like' behavior (Cooper and Sportolari, 1997). Similar to these findings, a student in one of the authors' classes is an example of a woman who did not leave relationship development to chance. She said- "I saw a guy walking to the library and was thunderstruck by the way he looked/carried himself. I caught up with him, told him my name and that I wanted to get to know him." Women who are comfortable initiating relationships use both the Internet and direct approach- they go after what they

want. In regard to our growth or destiny believers, these assertive women are growth believers- they go after what they want and they believe these men are hanging out on the Internet ready for the picking. On the flip side, the destiny person would sit back, do nothing, and leave a relationship to chance rather than searching the Internet for a partner.

#### 4. *NON-RELIGIOUS.*

Regarding religion, 70.4% saw themselves as religious with 29.6% seeing themselves as not very religious or not religious at all. Those who were not religious were more likely to ask a guy out than those who were religious (52.2% versus 34.9%) ( $p < .05$ ). The finding comes as no surprise as previous research suggests that being non-religious is associated with having nontraditional values/roles (McCready and McCready, 1973; Miller and Stark, 2002). The literature on gender and religiosity agrees that women are more religious than men due to differential gender socialization (Miller and Stark, 2002). Unlike females, males are traditionally socialized to be risk-takers, thus risking divine punishment for being irreligious. Women who regard themselves as non-religious or non-traditional may also be socialized to engage in risk taking behaviors, such as initiating an intimate relationship by asking a man out. Using this perspective, risky behaviors and being nonreligious are not gender specific. Rather, both nonreligious men and women are risk-takers. In regard to implicit self-theories of growth or destiny believers, these as-

sertive risky women are growth believers in that they do not believe that "God has destined them to meet Mr. Right." Rather, they believe that they need to find their own fellow and to nurture a relationship with him.

##### 5. *NONTRADITIONAL SEXUAL VALUES.*

Consistent with the idea that women who had asked a guy out were also non-religious (a nontraditional value) is the finding that these same women tended to have nontraditional sexual values. Of those women who had initiated a relationship with a guy, over forty percent (44%) reported having a hedonistic sexual value ("If it feels good, do it) and over forty percent (40.8%) reported having a relativistic sexual value ("Sexual intercourse is acceptable in the context of an emotional relationship") compared to slightly over a quarter (25.8%) who regarded themselves as having absolutist sexual values ("Wait until marriage to have intercourse"). Hence, women with nontraditional sexual values were much more likely to be assertive in initiating a new relationship with a man. In regard to the growth or destiny believer categories, the women who initiated relationships with men may be characterized as growth believers and are on the "find your own man" plan.

##### 6. *OPEN TO COHABITATION.*

Of the women who reported that they had asked a man to go out, over forty percent (44.6%) reported that they would cohabit with a man compared to 26.0% who would not cohab-

it. This difference was statistically significant ( $p < .001$ ). Given that non-religious women with hedonistic/relativistic sexual values had asked a guy to go out, it comes as no surprise that these women were also open to cohabitation (they are not bound by traditional norms). This finding is supported by the research of Michael, Gagnon, Laumann, and Kolata (1994), who contend that cohabitating men and women are more likely to have non-traditional sexual values. In regard to our growth or destiny believers, these aggressive women are growth believers who are willing to live with a man and nurture a relationship with him.

##### *WHITE.*

White women were significantly ( $p < .05$ ) more likely to report that they had asked a guy out than black (African-American Black, African Black, Caribbean Black) women. Over forty percent (41.4%) of the white women, compared to 28.2 percent of the black women in the sample reported that they had asked a guy out. This finding is not surprising in that blacks are traditionally more conservative in religion (Sherkat, 2002) and sexual values (Michael et al., 1994) than whites. Since religion is associated with destiny, the growth believers may be more associated with being white.

##### 8. *SEXUALLY FAITHFUL.*

Women who are nontraditional in terms of religion (e. g. nonreligious), who have nontraditional sexual values (e. g. hedonistic/relativistic), and who are nontraditional about living togeth-

er (e. g. open to cohabitation) might also be assumed to be nontraditional about fidelity (e.g. less faithful in relationships) than women who are religious, virginal, and against cohabitation. In addition, one might assume that women who initiate intimate relationships with men (a nontraditional gender role behavior) would be more likely to be unfaithful than women who do not ask men out (a traditional gender role behavior). Analysis of the data suggested otherwise. Women who had asked a guy out were more likely to report having been FAITHFUL in previous relationships than women who had not asked a guy out (44.5% versus 34.8%) ( $p < .01$ ).

One explanation for why women who initiated relationships with men were more likely to be faithful in relationships is that the act of their initiating a relationship may reflect the strong positive value these women placed on the relationship with the person they pursued and that the value of sexual fidelity is consistent with not wanting to jeopardize a valued relationship. This theme is reflected in the country western song, "When I Think about Cheating" made popular by Gretchen Wilson. The song details that part of the motivation for remaining faithful is the high value that is placed on the relationship....

*"When I think about cheating  
I Just think about you leaving  
How my world would fall apart  
If you took your love away."*

Previous research also confirms that persons in high quality, happy relationships are less likely to have affairs (Treas and Giesen, 2000). Ex-

tramarital sex lowers marital satisfaction and contributes to relationship break-down (Previti and Amato, 2004). Growth believers fit into this context since these women may feel that fidelity would help to nurture the relationships with the men they initiate.

#### 9. INVOLVEMENT IN "FRIENDS WITH BENEFITS" RELATIONSHIP.

Women who have been in a "friends with benefits (FWB)" relationship (had sex with a friend in a nonromantic, non committed relationship) were more likely to have asked a guy out than women who had been involved in such a relationship (47.6% versus 30.4%) ( $p < .001$ ). Since involvement in a FWBs relationship may be considered a "deviant" relationship, particularly for the woman since it is a context of sex without commitment, we might expect less traditional women to be attracted to the relationship and to be open to other nontraditional behaviors such as asking guys out. Growth believers fit in this context since these assertive women may feel that they can emphasize the friendship in a "friends with benefits" relationship.

#### 10. USED BIRTH CONTROL LAST INTERCOURSE.

Women who reported that they had used some form of birth control (other than withdrawal) the last time they had intercourse were more likely to have asked a guy out than women who had used no method of contraception their last intercourse experience (44.6% versus 37.9%) ( $p < .05$ ). Similar to the rationale used above, women initiators sometimes reflected

a great deal of selectivity in who they choose to have sex with. Consistent with such deliberate thinking about intercourse was the decision to protect the relationship from an unwanted pregnancy. These contraceptive users are definitely growth believers in that they feel they should take responsibility for their sexual intimacy.

### Implications

In the present work, implicit theories refer to beliefs about the nature of intimate relationships. Destiny believers hold the belief that potential intimate partners are either meant to be or not meant to be and that there is "one true love." Growth believers hold the belief that potential intimate partners are cultivated over time and that one can experience multiple "true loves." Our research set out to explore if the characteristics of women who initiated romantic relationships were destiny believers or growth believers. Findings indicate that these women do not always fit neatly into this binary classification of relationship beliefs. According to Knee (1998), people prefer growth to destiny. Our findings of women who initiate romantic relationships with men confirm this. Specifically, women who experienced "love at first sight" fit the classification of destiny believers. "Love at first sight" is an indicator of destiny because it is fixed or destined to happen, rather than an experience that is grown or nurtured. Growth believers were nonreligious white women who were non-believers in "one true love," had non-traditional sexual values, had searched the Internet for partners,

were open to cohabitation, were sexually faithful, had been involved in a "friends with benefits" relationship, and used birth control last intercourse. Worthy of discussion is the fact that women who initiated relationships with men were non-believers in "one true love" and had experienced "love at first sight." Non-believers in "one true love" is a very clear indicator of a belief in growth and experiencing "love at first sight" is a clear indicator of a belief in destiny. However, women who initiated romantic relationships with men had both beliefs according to implicit theories and the nature of relationships. One might conclude that women who initiate relationships with men might have a combination of growth and destiny beliefs for relationship development.

We can even complicate the matter further by asking what exactly does "love" mean in the context of "one true love" and "love at first sight?" According to Disney, romantic couple relationships are created by "love at first" (Tanner, Haddock, Zimmerman, Lund, 2003). Is "love at first sight" something that we hold on to as magical and an act of destiny? Like Cinderella and Mae West, could it be that aggressive non-traditional American women are holding on to a fantasy of experiencing "one true love" and "love at first sight?" Is experiencing "one true love" and "love at first sight" beyond women's leap into non-traditional gender roles? Are all women socialized to fantasize about experiencing both? Interestingly, romantic attitudes and beliefs in destiny may not be gender specific. Sprecher and Toro-Morn

(2002) found that both men and women moderately sanction beliefs in destiny. Other findings indicate that emerging adult and adolescent males endorse the romantic belief in love at first sight more strongly than emerging and adolescent females (Montgomery, 2005). These interpretations suggest that belief in destiny may be more relevant to gender role expectations and intimate relationship initiation than the belief in growth.

Analysis of these data revealed that almost 40 percent (39.1%) of the undergraduate women at a large southeastern university had asked a guy to go out (a nontraditional gender role behavior). There are implications of this finding for both women and men. Women who feel uncomfortable asking a man out, who fear rejection for doing so, or who lack the social skills to do so ("Hey big boy! ... Wanna get a pizza?"), may be less likely to get their man who will be whisked away by women who have such comfort, overcome their fear of rejection, and who make their interest in a partner known. Recall the earlier reference to the female student in one of the authors' classes who went up to a man (who was walking to the library), started flirting, and asked him out. This couple is now married.

In occupations, government, and intimacy, women are successfully crossing traditional gender role boundaries. As women break out of their traditional submissive roles, courtship scripts will inevitably change. The implication of this study for men is not to be surprised when a woman makes a direct request to go out- that relation-

ship norms are changing. For some men, this comes as a welcome trend in that they feel burdened that they must always be the first one to indicate interest in a partner and to move the relationship forward. Normalizing non-traditional courtship narratives will help remove the uncertainty about men's interest for women and vice versa. Men might also reevaluate their negative stereotypical notions of women who initiate relationships ("they are loose") and be reminded that the women in this study who had asked men out were MORE likely to have been faithful in previous relationships than those who had not.

### **Limitations**

The data for this study should be interpreted cautiously. The convenience sample of 692 respondents is hardly representative of the 17 plus million college students throughout the United States (Statistical Abstract of the United States, 2009. Table 272).

The data for this study are also quantitative with no qualitative interviews to provide insights on the raw statistics. Subsequent research might include interviews with college women to elicit information about their feelings/perceptions about being in the role of relationship initiator. For example, how do women explain their own nontraditional gender role behavior, how do they feel when they ask a guy (or girl) out, how do they perceive they are viewed by the men (or women) they ask out, how do they perceive they are viewed by others (friends, family) because they ask men (or women) out, what strategies do women use to ini-

tiate intimate relationships with men (or women), what factors influence women to initiate intimate relationships, and how do men (or women) react to being asked out? In addition, interviews may reveal the degree to which physical attractiveness was a variable in women's asking a guy for a date. Physically attractive females may have had more confidence in themselves (fearing less rejection) and been more apt to initiate.

Another limitation of this research is that it is based on heterosexual relationships. The data do not include how college women that identify as bisexual or lesbian ask women out.

Finally, this research is an exploratory analysis that should be followed up with multi-variate analysis to develop a more complete and accurate understanding of women who initiate relationships.

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