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Knowles, Charlotte

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Living the Life of the Mind: Mind the Gap

Charlotte Knowles on the ethics and politics of large age gaps in romantic relationships

On a blustery summer's day a few years ago, I found myself in an Airbnb in Hastings arguing with a friend about Rowan Atkinson. In 2015 Atkinson divorced his wife of 25 years (and partner for a further 10), for a woman almost half his age. My contention was that this was at best sad, and at worst a symptom of a larger societal problem regarding the way older women are seen as disposable and irrelevant when they reach a certain age, and are easily cast aside for a "younger model". Yes, there are cases of "cougars" (an older woman dating a younger man), but these are often flagged up with excitement and intrigue by the press for their rarity (I'm thinking Sam and Aaron Taylor-Johnson). By contrast, when an older man is dating a younger woman (as in the majority of cases), no one bats an eyelid.

If you google "celebrities with a big age gap" the first result is a list of 40 celebrity couples with a minimum 10-year age difference. Of the 37 heterosexual couples listed, 34 have an older male partner, some with a 30+ year age difference (hello Billy Joel and Alexis Roderick). Mostly these age gaps go unremarked. Why wouldn't an older man take advantage of his fame and status to snare a much younger and more attractive woman? Why wouldn't a young woman

want to be with the guy who penned the lyrics "Birth control, Ho Chi Minh, Richard Nixon back again", even if she was only seven years old when the song was released? I guess her parents probably loved it and she heard it all the time growing up.

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All of this, of course, is not to deny that many couples with large age differences are very happy. Despite coming from different generations, they find common ground, shared interests, a "partner in crime", and go on to live fulfilling lives together. Although in some cases I do wonder what they talk about. If your partner is not old enough to remember Grange Hill (or in the

case of infamous pothole protestor, model train enthusiast and singer Rod Stewart, when talkies were first introduced) how are they going to understand your references to Mr Bronson and his toupee, or your excitement whenever you hear a film with actual dialogue and not just a piano accompaniment and subtitles?

Nevertheless, it is not for me to judge someone else's relationship. Perhaps 90s children's TV is just not as important to them as it is to me, and indeed many of my friends are in relationships with a large age gap, but it's not weird or creepy. No one appears coerced, there are no strange power dynamics, they're all content and consenting adults who seem well matched. So, what's the problem? To see what the issues might be, we can't just focus on individual couples who demonstrate through their love that "age is just a number". Instead, we need to take a *structural* view of the situation and, in so doing, we can come to see some issues that might otherwise remain concealed.

Structural injustice is a term coined by Iris Marion Young to account for the kinds of injustices that cannot be captured by focussing on the actions of (malicious) individual agents, or explicitly unjust policies. Rather, structural injustices result from complex patterns of social interactions that systematically privilege some whilst disadvantaging others. Structural injustices are the kinds of injustices that may not be visible when looked at on an individual level. Just as in relationships with large age differences (hopefully) no one is forcing the couple to be together, and no law compels their union, in cases of structural injustice there is no obvious wrongdoer and maybe not even an obvious wrongdoing. However, when

we take a zoomed-out view of the situation, and focus on patterns of behaviour and the actions of agents considered collectively, we begin to see how certain harms and injustices may be perpetuated. Moreover, these injustices often endure in and through the seemingly innocuous and everyday behaviours, actions, attitudes and norms that structure our social world.

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In their paper "Agency, Complicity and Structural Responsibility", Corwin Aragon and Alison Jaggar give the example of helping a disabled person to cross the road. Considered on an individual basis, this could be seen as a neutral, perhaps even laudable act. However, considered at a structural level we might see that it's actually part of a pattern of patronising behaviour towards disabled people, involving unwarranted and unasked for interference in their lives. Although there is no agent involved with a bad will, and people in the situation may be actively trying to do good, we can nevertheless say there is something undesirable about the resulting situation. If we take the lens of structural injustice and apply it to

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the case of age gaps in relationships, what might this tell us about the potential harms and injustices of the situation?

First of all, we might highlight the fact that it's predominantly older men dating younger women, and ask what this tells us about societal norms. The general trend indicates that men are still valued and seen as viable partners into older age, whilst women are not. But perhaps this inequality does not end with romantic entanglements, as this valuation of older men and the invisibilisation of older women is a pattern we can see across society more generally. For example,

if we think about representation on television, it is often remarked that when women reach a certain age they are “retired” from public view (think about the rejigging of the *Country File* presenting team a few years back). Whereas men are allowed to continue on well into their geriatric years – hi John Craven! Women disappear from the screen when the production team detect the first hint of a smile-line or a crow's foot.

Similarly, in film and TV it's often remarked that there are fewer roles written for older women, and when we see husband and wife teams represented, they again



frequently reproduce the old man young woman trope. Or, when a woman is cast as someone's mother, it's not uncommon for her to, in reality, be only 2-3 years older than the male actor playing her son. We might think about the way these cultural representations of appropriate partnerships and the lack of visibility of older women, inform our personal relationships and the choices we make, potentially distorting our preferences and expectations in strange ways. From this perspective, we can view the old-man-young-woman partnering not just as a matter of individual choice, but as reflecting a wider pattern of the social valuation of old men and the devaluation of older women, a trend about which we might be rightly concerned. Indeed, as Robin Zheng argues in her paper "Why Yellow Fever isn't Flattering: A Case Against Racial Fetishes", there can be reasons to reflect on, question and perhaps even try to change our sexual preferences when they reflect and reinforce unjust structures.

Secondly, we might worry about the pressure these norms put on women to keep looking young so that they are not written out of their own careers and love lives. In her book *Perfect Me: Beauty as an Ethical Ideal*, Heather Widdows highlights that youth is a key tenet of what she terms the "beauty ideal": that we should all be young, thin, firm and smooth. Widdows argues that the beauty ideal now functions as a global, ethical ideal. Accordingly, "not engaging in beauty activity is not merely a prudential failure, aesthetic failure, or failure to conform to some social norm (although it may be these too), but a moral failure." This sets the stakes incredibly high. A woman who does not resist the ageing process is not only

undesirable, she is morally bad. Older men dating younger women plays a role in reinforcing and reiterating these beauty norms, stressing that it really is the agent who is young, firm, smooth and thin who will be rewarded; be it with love, a rich husband, a glittering media career, or all of the above.

Looking at issues like age gaps through this structural lens is not to blame the people involved. Calista Flockhart and Harrison Ford genuinely seem very happy together. She doesn't have to be a money grabbing gold digger and he doesn't have to be a vain, shallow pensioner. But there might still be more far reaching, global implications – structural injustices – that we help to unintentionally uphold and reproduce through our actions and our choice of partner, and this is perhaps something worth reflecting on. And all of this is to say nothing about Leonardo di Caprio and his apparent systematic refusal to date a woman over 25, but that's a column for another day.

Charlotte Knowles is an assistant professor in ethics, social and political philosophy at the university of Groningen. Her primary research areas are in feminist philosophy and phenomenology, with a particular focus on issues of complicity, freedom, injustice and responsibility. You can follow her on twitter at @charknowlez.