

**Older Women-Younger Men  
Relationships: the Social Phenomenon  
of 'Cougars'. A Research Note**

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# Older Women–Younger Men Relationships: The Social Phenomenon of ‘Cougars’. A Research Note

## Abstract

Couples where the woman is significantly older than her male partner currently have a high prominence in national and international media and in popular culture. The women in such arrangements have attracted a colloquial label, ‘cougar’. This arrangement represents a break from the past when generally the male was the older partner. Our initial analysis of census data suggests that the extent of the older woman–younger male couple is exaggerated by the media. Nevertheless, the data indicate it is an important group and its size does seem to have been growing since the 1980s, at least for those living together in the same households. Like other researchers we also suspect that the number of couples where the woman is older who form long-term relationships is considerably smaller than the number of such couples who have had short-term relationships. Our brief canvassing of theories of partner choice suggests there are social and economic reasons for further growth of this type of partnering arrangement. If there is further significant growth, it is likely the somewhat negative predatory term ‘cougar’ will disappear or at least change its current connotations.

**Key words:** Women, relationships, cougars, homogamy, heterogamy.

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# Older Women–Younger Men Relationships: The Social Phenomenon of ‘Cougars’. A Research Note

## Introduction

At the heart of the study of demography are issues most people are interested in: birth, death, and partnering. It is heterosexual partnering, in its widest sense from marriage to short-term relationships, that we consider in this research note. In histories of love, sex, and marriage, the roles of love and lust are downplayed in partnering.<sup>1</sup> It is argued that these emotions have only recently influenced decisions, because couple formation was primarily an economic transaction. But even as societies moved away from economic factors dominating partnering decisions, other constraints on partner choices often remained. For example, couples tended to be of the same religion and ethnic intermarriage was often frowned upon or banned, and, until recently, only heterosexual partnering was condoned legally. In addition, historically, men in married couples tended to be older than their partners.<sup>2</sup>

While some physical differences are generally sought in heterosexual partners, much theory and historical evidence suggest that couples have many common characteristics, including height and a wide variety of aptitude and personality test scores.<sup>3</sup> However, over time, these similarities have changed. For example, studies show that matching by religious belief has become less common, but matching by broad educational group has become more common<sup>4</sup>. Average age differences between men and women can also change over time.

In societies where most marriages are between partners of a broadly similar age, public attention is sometimes focused on couples with a wide age gap. Often the attention is on high profile and financially well off men who have much younger partners. But perhaps even more attention is paid to women who are much older than their partners. Some of these partnerships are formal marriages but many are informal relationships, for example, the affair reported in early 2010 of Iris Robinson, a then 58-year-old Irish member of parliament, with a 19-year-old.<sup>5</sup> As often happens with such new arrangements, the older female in such pairings has attracted a colloquial label – ‘cougar’.<sup>6</sup>

In this research note, we examine aspects of the social phenomenon of cougars. We begin by exploring the origin of the label and its most widely accepted definition. We then briefly

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<sup>1</sup> Murstein (1974).

<sup>2</sup> Bergstrom (1997).

<sup>3</sup> Epstein & Guttman (1984).

<sup>4</sup> Kalmijn (1991).

<sup>5</sup> *Stuff.co.nz* (2009).

<sup>6</sup> We use this term because it is widely known, though we do recognise for a variety of reasons some people may find the term offensive.

canvass the portrayal of these types of relationship in popular culture. This discussion is followed by a short section setting out some of the theories that might explain why men are generally slightly older than their partners, but, more importantly, why this pattern might be changing. We also discuss the advantages and disadvantages for women in relationships with younger men as well as the 'type' of woman most likely to be a cougar. We then turn to New Zealand census data to assess how common these relationships are. In doing so, we can identify only couples who record they are living together in the same household as married or defacto couples. This limitation rules out a variety of other important relationships, such as couples who do not live together and couples who are in short-term relationships. We also focus only on heterosexual couples. Finally, we set out some ideas for further research.

Although the study of cougars could be seen as somewhat facile, underlying this phenomenon are important social changes that are taking place in society. These changes include men and women living longer and being in more relationships over their lifecycle. One consequence of these changes is that a person's choice in partner when a person is young may vary from their second or subsequent choices when they are older. Social changes also include significant changes in attitudes and gender roles of men and women in areas of education, paid work, and wider income earning.

### **Definition of cougar**

It is believed that the slang term cougar was coined in the 1980s by Canadian ice hockey team *The Vancouver Canucks*. The team used the term to describe the older, single women who went to the team's games to pursue players sexually. The expression first appeared in the print media in 2001 when the Canadian newspaper *The Toronto Sun* published a news story on cougars. This story was prompted by the introduction of Canadian dating website *CougarDate.com*. The author of the story, *Toronto Sun* columnist Valerie Gibson, went on to publish *Cougar: A guide for older women dating younger men* in 2002. In the book, Gibson discussed her many relationships with men 10 to 20 years her junior and offered advice and insight for women who were considering such a relationship. This was the first dating guide for cougars to attract mainstream media attention and has been credited with raising public awareness and stimulating discussion on this 'unconventional' type of relationship.

Soon after the release of Gibson's book, the term spread to the United States, and through its use in American media, television, and movies it has become well known and commonly used in many other countries, including New Zealand. Public awareness and wide usage of the term cougar is perhaps highlighted by the term being runner-up in the 2007 Oxford University Press (USA) Word of the Year competition and a University of British Columbia etymologist having submitted the additional meaning of the word cougar to the *Oxford English Dictionary*.<sup>7</sup> There are many definitions of (and connotations attached to) the term

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<sup>7</sup> Hsu (2009).

cougar, ranging from empowering to offensive, but the most widely used and simple definition of a cougar is a woman aged 35 years or over who dates, or seeks to date, a man more than eight years her junior. There had been no equivalent term for males who have much younger partners until recently with the emergence of the term 'rhino'.<sup>8</sup> In terms of defining socially acceptable age differences, popular culture has developed a formula for calculating this, commonly known as the 'never date anyone under half your age plus seven rule'.<sup>9</sup>

### **Cougars in popular culture**

An early example of an older women–younger man relationship in film was Mrs Robinson and younger man Benjamin Braddock in the 1976 drama *The Graduate*. In 1979, *Older Women: Younger Men* was published by two popular American authors who based the book on a study they had undertaken in the United States.<sup>10</sup> In New Zealand, Sue McCauley's 1982 autobiographically based book *Other Halves* explored the ethnic, gender, age, and class differences of a relationship between a separated Pākehā mother and a much younger Māori man. This book attracted a wide readership and became a best seller. Further film and television portrayals of the older women–younger man relationship were seen in 1997 with the release of the film *Cougar Club* and the introduction of the then controversial television series *Sex and the City*, featuring the ultimate cougar, Samantha Jones. However, it was not until 2003 when actor Demi Moore began a relationship with actor Ashton Kutcher, 15 years her junior, that the media really latched on to the concept of cougars. Following Moore and Kutcher's union, television host Oprah Winfrey ran a cover story on cougars in the October issue of *O* magazine; media attention and debate escalated. The couple went on to marry in September 2005 when Moore was 42 and Kutcher was 27.

Other celebrity couples who have attracted high levels of media attention because of their age difference include singer-songwriter Sheryl Crowe (47) and Tour de France cycling champion Lance Armstrong (37); recently separated but previously long-time couple, actor Susan Sarandon (63) and actor Tim Robbins (51), who have two children together; and socialite Ivana Trump (59) and now ex-husband Rossano Rubicondi (35). Following her separation, Trump went on to date a 23-year-old French model. Actor and author Joan Collins has had many relationships with younger men, and television host Martha Stewart has also revealed she once dated a man 24 years her junior. Australian singer Kylie Minogue (41) is dating a man 10 years her junior, and New Zealand model Rachel Hunter (39) was engaged to her now ex-fiancée Jarret Stoll (27).

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<sup>8</sup> Davey (2009).

<sup>9</sup> *Wikipedia* (2009).

<sup>10</sup> Seskin & Ziegler (1979).

Perhaps in part because of the popularity and media attention received by celebrity cougars, the number of films in 2009 about relationships in which the woman is significantly older increased. These films include *Cheri*, in which Michelle Pfeiffer (51) is partnered up with Rupert Friend (27); *My Life in Ruins*, in which Nia Vardalos (46) romances Greek actor Alexis Georgoulis (34); and *The Rebound*, in which Catherine Zeta-Jones (39) dates a 25-year-old. *Spread* was also released in 2009, ironically starring Ashton Kutcher, the poster boy of cougar relationships, who pursues relationships with an older woman and a younger woman and is forced to decide between the two. Television shows featuring cougars such as *Cougar Town*, *Eastwick*, and *Accidentally on Purpose* also featured highly in 2009 and are set to screen in New Zealand in mid 2010. *Accidentally on Purpose* tells the story of a professional woman in her late 30s who becomes pregnant to a much younger man after a one-night stand. *Eastwick* features former supermodel Rebecca Romijn (36) as a divorced mother with a younger boyfriend who becomes drawn to a much younger newcomer to town. *Cougar Town*, arguably the most popular cougar show, tells the story of a recently divorced middle-aged mother who explores relationships with younger men. The show also addresses the social stigma surrounding cougars and has been described as a brutally realistic comedy about older single women “on the prowl”.<sup>11</sup>

Reality television shows about older women–younger men relationships have also become popular in the United States. In *Age of Love*, which borrows heavily from *The Bachelor*, two groups of women, ‘kittens’ (women aged in their 20s) and cougars (in their 40s) compete for the love and attention of former Australian tennis professional Mark Philippoussis. Previously mentioned cougar Ivana Trump hosted a similar reality show in 2009 appropriately named *Ivana Young Man*. In *The Real Housewives of Orange County* cougar housewives battle it out for younger men, including the sons of cast mates. Recently, the BBC began advertising for real-life cougars to feature in a documentary to be screened in 2010 about the perks of being a cougar. As well as reality shows, there are countless cougar dating websites, blogs, and books. 2009 also saw the introduction of a beauty pageant specifically for cougars, *Miss Cougar USA*, and a cruise specifically for cougars and young men.

With all this attention, it is not surprising that cougars have also filtered into New Zealand media and popular culture. On local television soap *Shortland Street* Yvonne, a mother of three in her late 50s is in a relationship with a man about 15 years her junior who is her daughter’s ex-fiancée. BBC film *The Mother* screened on TV One recently. In this film, a grandmother has a passionate affair with a man half her age who is also in a sexual relationship with her daughter. Radio stations have jumped on the cougar bandwagon, with popular New Zealand radio station 91 ZM running a competition in late 2009 in which

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<sup>11</sup> *New Zealand Herald* (2009).



listeners could win prizes by nominating their mother, sister, friend, aunty, or flatmate<sup>12</sup> as the ultimate cougar. Radio station The Rock recently hosted a cougar party and has released a 'cougar reference manual' on its website.

The most blatant, and arguably offensive, cougar promotion<sup>13</sup> was launched in January 2010 by Air New Zealand in conjunction with the NZI Sevens. 'Hunting packs' of cougars were asked to submit profiles via the Air New Zealand website to win tickets to The Sevens and be part of the 60-strong 'pride of cougar' cheerleading squad. Cheerleaders would be provided with cougar costumes and equipment to "attract the attention of young males" and co-sponsor 91ZM would provide 10 brave young men to be "thrown in as fresh meat to the winners". The site also provided tips for cougars, including "young males are still quite stupid – take advantage", and a promotional video depicted cougars as aggressive, promiscuous, tragic, and often intoxicated women out "on the prowl". The advertising campaign sparked controversy and was subsequently closed.

However, proof that the term cougar has become mainstream in New Zealand is perhaps best illustrated by the recent use of the word during parliamentary debates in the House of Representatives. In May 2009, and on subsequent occasions, Labour member of parliament Trevor Mallard referred to National member of parliament Simon Bridges as "cougar bait"<sup>14</sup> after Bridges admitted finding older woman Christine Rankin attractive.<sup>15</sup> Labour members of Parliament Grant Robertson and Lianne Dalziel have described Tauranga as "cougar territory",<sup>16</sup> again in reference to Bridges who is the member of parliament for Tauranga.

Nowdays, a Google search for 'cougar women' results in 3,840,000 hits.<sup>17</sup> The widespread media attention on cougars and the term's acceptance into popular culture are also reflected in American weekly news magazine *Newsweek's* declaration that 2009 was "the year of the cougar". There is no doubt that cougars have carved out a place in popular culture. But does the popularity of cougar relationships in the media and among celebrities translate into real life for 'real' women or are they simply a media creation? There has been little research into relationships in which the woman is much older than her partner, but there is some research and literature that helps to explain why more women are *able* and are *choosing* to enter into this type of relationship.

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<sup>12</sup> ZM Online (n.d.).

<sup>13</sup> Air New Zealand (2009).

<sup>14</sup> New Zealand Parliament (2009a).

<sup>15</sup> Aaronson (2009).

<sup>16</sup> New Zealand Parliament (2009b).

<sup>17</sup> Google search undertaken on 15 December 2009.

### Theories on mate selection among humans

The literature on mate selection by humans is vast.<sup>18</sup> This literature can be found in a wide variety of academic disciplines, including economics, sociology, socio-biology, anthropology, and psychology. Not surprisingly, based on the particular area the discipline is built on, some theories focus on biologically based drivers, others draw on rational economic choices, and others focus on issues such as status seeking or concepts of romantic love. In addition, within each of the main disciplinary sets of thinking there are also ongoing debates about what drives partner selection. Some of this literature is highly speculative and some is based on experiments or empirical data. Given this vast conflicting literature, the following brief discussion features just a few of these theories.

When choosing a partner, one general rule that 'like attracts like' still applies for men and women. Homogamous relationships in which both members of the couple are similar in their ethnicity, religion, education level, and broad age group remain common. However, overall there has been a small shift from the more homogamous relationships of the mid-20th century to the more heterogamous relationships of the 1980s, 1990s, and today.<sup>19</sup> Mixed-faith and interethnic relationships have become more accepted and common in society. In terms of age, older husband – younger wife relationships are still customary, especially when the age difference is only a few years.<sup>20</sup> By comparison, relationships in which the woman is older, in particular significantly older, appear to still be much less common. This may be attributed to a taboo that continues to surround this type of relationship as a large age difference between a woman and a man is commonly seen as representing a mother–son relationship.<sup>21</sup> Even when the husband is the significantly older partner, society seems much more likely to accept the relationship than if the husband is significantly younger.<sup>22</sup>

However, relationships in which the woman is the significantly older partner are slowly becoming more socially acceptable and more common, perhaps thanks to the media attention cougar relationships have received as well as heightened awareness of cougars in popular culture. In addition, there are also several indicators as to why women are choosing this type of relationship. These indicators have been explored in research and discussed in literature.

One theory put forward to explain the increase in woman choosing such relationships is that overall gender equality has increased, in particular since the sexual revolution of the 1970s. As women become more equal in society they are less likely to conform to traditional gender roles and patterns so they forego the usual pattern in marriage where the male is

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<sup>18</sup> Callister (1998, 2000) explores some theories of mate selection.

<sup>19</sup> Proulx, Caron, & Logue (2006).

<sup>20</sup> Knox, Britton, & Crisp (1997).

<sup>21</sup> Vera, Berardo, & Berardo (1985).

<sup>22</sup> Knox, Zusman, & Nieves (1997).

older.<sup>23</sup> In the Western world, women are increasingly of similar education and income levels to men, are taking on senior roles in the workplace, and are gaining more status. A study spanning 80 years on relationships, concluded male–female status was a primary determinant of patterns in age difference in marriage.<sup>24</sup> In addition, men entering relationships with older women have been raised in the post-feminist era, so are potentially more likely to be open-minded about women and their role in society, and may be less likely to have power or status issues.

The theory that gender equality and status have a strong impact on age difference in relationships can be supported by a comparison of developed countries with developing countries in which there is overall less gender equality. In a cross-national survey<sup>25</sup> in developing countries, which have patriarchal societies and societies characterised by patriarchal kinship organisation, researchers found that the age difference was relatively large and unions in which the husband is 10 years or older were relatively frequent.<sup>26</sup> With few exceptions, marriages in which the wife was older were avoided. The researchers who conducted the survey concluded that age-difference distributions in marriage are directly attributable to kinship structure and the status of women. Interestingly, the researchers also concluded that the age difference is relatively small in developing countries in which the traditional social structure allows for the more equal status of spouses, where Western forms of family formation have become common, or where exposure to the West and the process of modernisation has improved the status of women.<sup>27</sup>

In the Western world, gender equality, the sexual revolution, and in particular the advent of the contraceptive pill have given women more freedom when choosing a partner. The contraceptive pill brought about a distinction between childbearing and sexuality, enabling women to choose to be with a partner who suited them but who was not necessarily the most suitable partner to bear children with (usually an older man with a relatively good income). The pill also gave women the option of delaying childbirth or rejecting the notion of having children altogether. On a recent BBC radio interview,<sup>28</sup> relationships psychologist Susan Quilliam attributed the increase of older women–younger men relationships to this division of childbearing and sexuality. Quilliam also noted that the pill freed women up to earn, be educated, and have more power in society. The overall increase of women’s income, education, and status also enables women to enter into relationships with younger men because they are no longer financially dependent on older men.

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<sup>23</sup> Knox, Britton, & Crisp (1997).

<sup>24</sup> Atkinson & Glass (1985).

<sup>25</sup> Casterline, Williams, & McDonald (1986).

<sup>26</sup> Ibid

<sup>27</sup> Ibid

<sup>28</sup> BBC (2009).

A woman's lack of choice as to partner has also been attributed to women entering into relationships with younger men. Social researchers generally accept that there is a 'marriage squeeze' for single women as they age.<sup>29</sup> This is particularly the case for women in the baby-boomer generation. A marriage squeeze occurs when women have the smallest pool of compatible men with which to partner up as conventionally defined, that is, men who are two to three years older, of similar background, and with higher levels of education and income. Contributing factors to this marriage squeeze include the tendency of men to marry younger women, the higher male death rate, and that more women are delaying both marriage and childbearing to pursue a career.<sup>30</sup> Therefore, with fewer 'ideal' men of their own age from which to choose, women may increasingly wish (or need) to partner with younger men. Research has also shown that older women have much more flexible partner criteria than younger women,<sup>31</sup> which could be attributed to the marriage squeeze or the tendency of older women to be more open-minded because they have had more experience with relationships.

There are also possible benefits for women who choose a younger partner. In the later years of life, a woman with a younger partner may not have to support her spouse (physically or emotionally) in their final years as their health declines, but rather be cared for by their partner. Alternatively each partner may be able to care equally for the other as they age at relatively the same rate (based on the assumption that women typically live four years longer than men).<sup>32</sup> This results in a better quality of life for women in their final years. One study even concluded that women married to younger men lived longer than expected and women married to older men died sooner than expected.<sup>33</sup> Another study, which involved interviews with 76 women in older woman-younger man relationships, highlighted the fact women are attracted to younger men simply because of their youth and the physical attractions that accompany youth.<sup>34</sup> The women in the study also reported that one of the best parts about being involved in this type of relationship was that it made them feel younger. Sex and sexual compatibility were additional motivating factors behind these relationships. The growing acceptance and realisation in society that women might still be interested in sex once they are past childbearing age has given women more freedom to choose younger partners. Internet dating sites have enabled easier access for older women to younger men who would otherwise be difficult to meet.

Despite the benefits that come with a relationship with a younger man there are also drawbacks, as there are with any relationship regardless of age difference. In 2006, an

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<sup>29</sup> Levesque & Caron (2004).

<sup>30</sup> Michael, Gagnon, Lauman, & Kolata (1994).

<sup>31</sup> Levesque & Caron (2004).

<sup>32</sup> Callister & Didham (2009).

<sup>33</sup> Klinger-Vartabedian & Wispe (1989).

<sup>34</sup> Seskin & Ziegler (1979).

exploratory study on married couples in which the wife was 10 or more years older than her husband was undertaken to identify the impact of age difference on the relationship, the issues that arise for such a couple, and differences in husbands and wives experiences.<sup>35</sup> One of the major disadvantages identified was the social stigma surrounding the relationship, with almost half the women in the study identifying this as a major issue. This finding supports previous research indicating that women in these relationships feel pressure from their friends and family.<sup>36</sup> Half of the men and women reported that their family and children had problems, at least initially, with their marriage because of its unconventional nature, and couples were often hesitant to divulge their relationship to family and friends. Another major issue was that the women were coming towards the end of their fertile years or did not want (more) children, as opposed to their younger partners who were interested in starting a family. Intimacy and attractiveness issues were also a major concern for women, particularly as they will reach 'old age' before their partner. No couple reported money to be an issue; many men stated that their partner's higher income was an advantage rather than a problem. However, other research has shown this can often lead to conflict between the couple.<sup>37</sup>

This leads to the question of what costs and benefits there are for both partners in this type of relationship. The balancing or exchange of costs and benefits with a partner is otherwise known as the social exchange theory.<sup>38</sup> This theory could be used to partly explain the emergence of older women–younger men relationships. According to this theory, individuals seek the 'best value' they can in a mate. Each individual is assumed to carry an approximate market value, depending on the degree to which he or she possesses valued traits such as beauty, intelligence, charm, wealth, and social status. It is assumed that if every individual seeks the best value in a mate, individuals of approximately equal value will tend to pair up. In this manner, individuals can be said to exchange their assets for those in a partner.<sup>39</sup>

Applying this theory, single women in their 40s and 50s might be seen as having, on a range of characteristics, the highest 'market value' they have ever had, so they are now much more attractive partners to both men their own age and younger men. On average, women now are more educated than ever, earn higher incomes, have a higher status in society, can have recreational sex with less fear of pregnancy, and are more likely and able to 'look younger' due to diet, exercise, and cosmetic procedures. Compare this with the 'market value' of a woman of the same age in the 1950s. She would have had a lower education level, had little or no income because her husband would have supported her financially, not been

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<sup>35</sup> Proulx, Caron, & Logue (2006).

<sup>36</sup> Seskin & Ziegler (1979).

<sup>37</sup> Brings & Winter (2000).

<sup>38</sup> Thibaut & Kelley (1959); Homans (1961).

<sup>39</sup> Kenrick et al. (1993, p. 951)

able to have recreational sex without fear of pregnancy because of the lack of contraception, have had several children, and not have been able to look as young as women can today.

Single, or even partnered, women in their 40s and 50s are now able to get into the dating market to find a new partner. These women may be more compatible with younger men than men of a similar age in the short term because the benefits for both partners outweigh the costs. Both partners may not want to enter into a long-term relationship because the female partner may have already been married and want to maintain independence, and the male partner may not want to settle down at a young age. Both partners may be more sexually compatible as women reach their sexual peak later in life than men. The relationship could also be more fun for the female partner because her partner is youthful, open to new experiences, and more attractive than someone her own age, and the male partner may enjoy being with a woman with a higher income and for a variety of other reasons.

However, older women–younger men relationships may not work in the long term because ultimately each partner is not the ‘best value’ for the other. The older woman may not want to financially support her partner and intelligence, status levels, and different interests may become problems. In particular, some of these women may be concerned that if they stay with their partner more than three years and then separate he will be able to claim half her assets. The male partner may want to partner up with someone younger or have children, which may not be possible with an older woman (for physical reasons or because she chooses not to have (more) children). The younger male partner may not want to become a step-father to existing children. Research has shown that childbearing can be the ultimate deal breaker in this kind of relationship.<sup>40</sup> This overall unsuitability is also exacerbated by the continuing social stigma around these types of relationship, especially once they become formalised.

In addition to identifying the reasons a woman is now able or might choose to enter into a relationship with a younger man, researchers have studied the *type* of women most likely to entertain such a relationship. The research shows that women who marry younger men tend to be more highly educated<sup>41</sup> and marry later in life.<sup>42</sup> The two traits are interlinked, as highly educated women tend to marry later, which reduces their pool of potential partners, and to have more liberal ideas about marriage.<sup>43</sup> Women who have previously been married are also more likely to form relationships with younger partners. One study found that women who were in second marriages were seven times more likely to be in relationships

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<sup>40</sup> Proulx, Caron, & Logue (2006).

<sup>41</sup> Shehan, Berardo, Vera, & Carley (1991).

<sup>42</sup> Atkinson & Glass (1985); Bytheway (1981); Shehan, Berardo, Vera, & Carley (1991).

<sup>43</sup> Proulx, Caron, & Logue (2006).

with younger men.<sup>44</sup> A British study of marital patterns in the 1970s also found that people who remain unmarried into middle age were likely to marry people younger than themselves; this was particularly true for women.<sup>45</sup>

### **What the New Zealand data show**

The following data are drawn from the 1986 and 2006 New Zealand Census of Population and Dwellings. The 1991, 1996, and 2001 censuses were also examined but the data did not change the broad trends identified. Therefore, to keep the analysis simple only the 20-year change between 1986 and 2006 is discussed.

Data were obtained for men and women living in couples who recorded their ages. If one or both did not record their age, they were excluded from the analysis. Legally married and de facto couples are included, but only opposite-sex couples are included. It is possible that the characteristics of those couples who chose to live together in the same household could be different to those who have a relationship but do not live together, but the latter data are not available from the census.

To further simplify the analysis, we considered three age groups for men and women. These are the groups aged 40, 50, and 60. The age distribution of the partners of men and women in each of these single-age groups are presented as graphs to show broad changes (Figures 1–6). However, more detailed data are described in the text. The final graph, Figure 7, shows for 2006 the percentage of partners of men aged 30 to 70 who are 10 or more years older or 10 or more years younger.

Figures 1 to 6 shows some similarities. First, in each figure most men and women are in a broadly similar age group with relatively few partners much older or much younger. However, each of the graphs also shows some tendency for women to be younger than men in couples. But the comparison of 1986 and 2006 data shows a shift away from this pattern. Fewer men in 2006 than 1986 had younger partners and equally more women had younger partners. However, there are also some minor differences between the graphs.

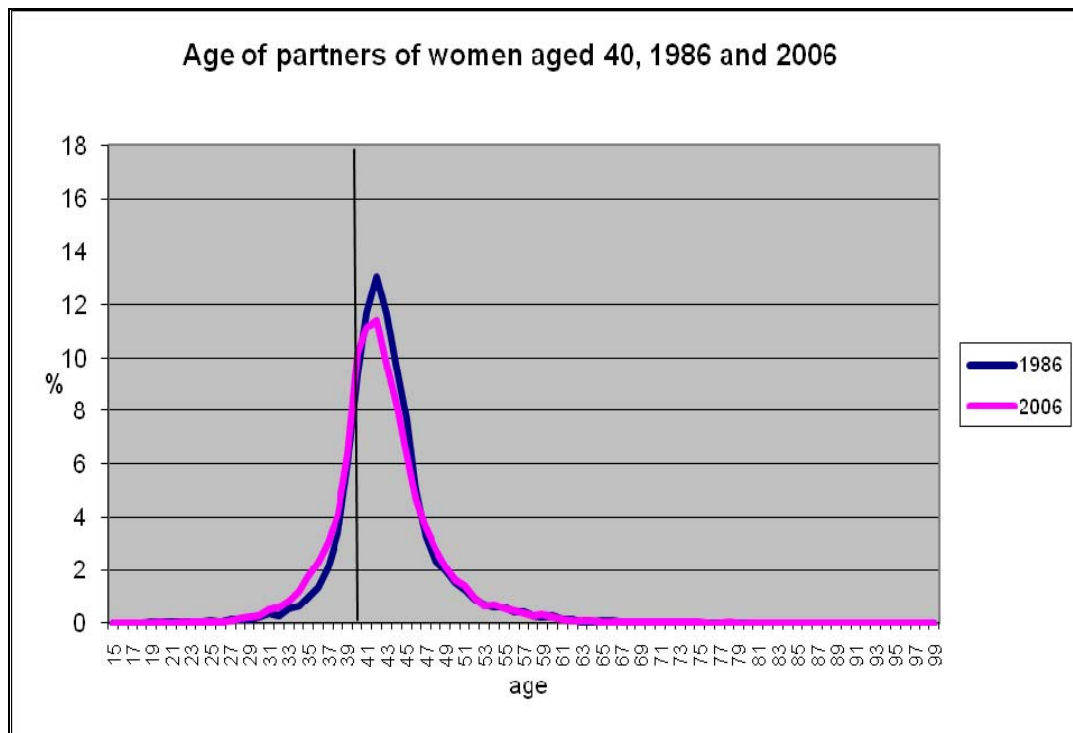
For women aged 40, in 2006 just under 1% had a partner who was 30 years or younger, that is, 10 or more years younger than themselves (Figure 1). This is little change from 1986. However, there has been a greater shift in the percentage of partners five or more years younger. In 1986, 3.8% of women aged 40 had a partner who was aged 35 years or younger. By 2006, this had risen to 5.8%.

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<sup>44</sup> Shehan, Berardo, Vera, & Carley (1991).

<sup>45</sup> Bytheway (1981).

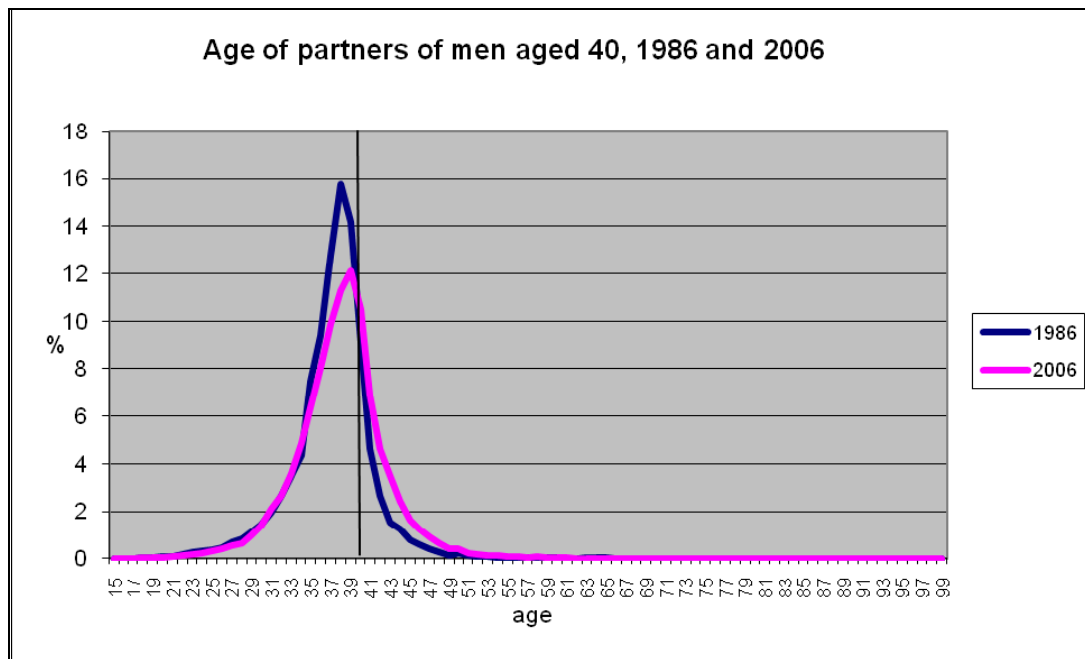
Figure 1



Relatively few men aged 40 had a partner 10 or more years younger: 5% in 2006 (Figure 2). But a much higher proportion, 24%, had a partner five or more years younger. In 1986, less than 1% of men in this age group had a partner 10 or more years older, and this had increased to only 1.4% in 2006. Overall, in 1986, 13% of men aged 40 had a partner older than themselves (41 years or older); by 2006, this had increased to 24%.

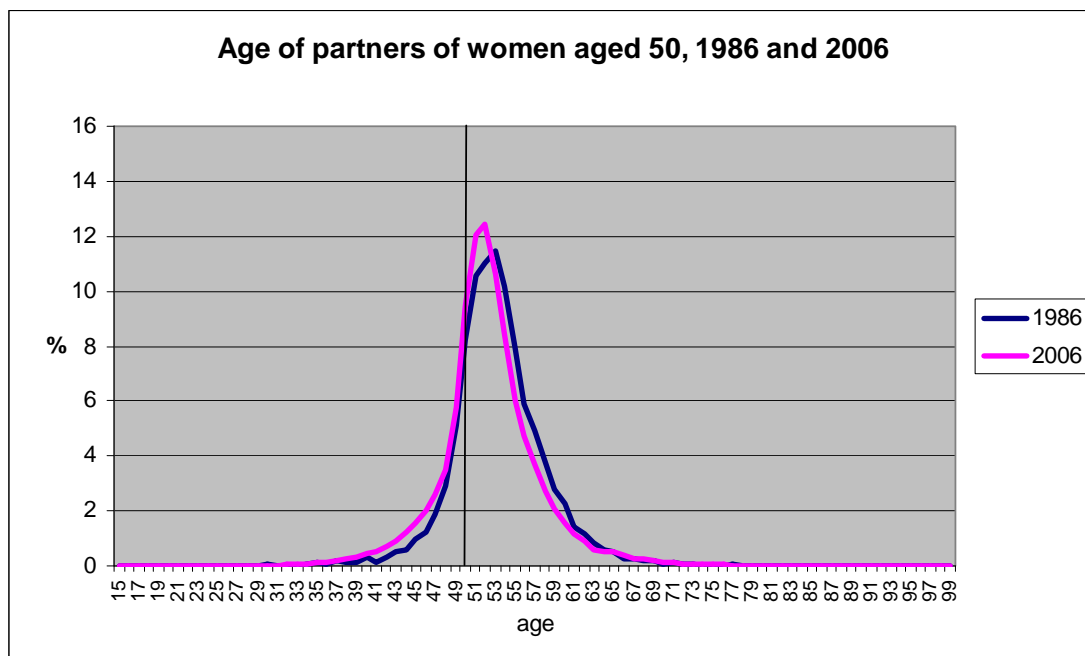


**Figure 2**



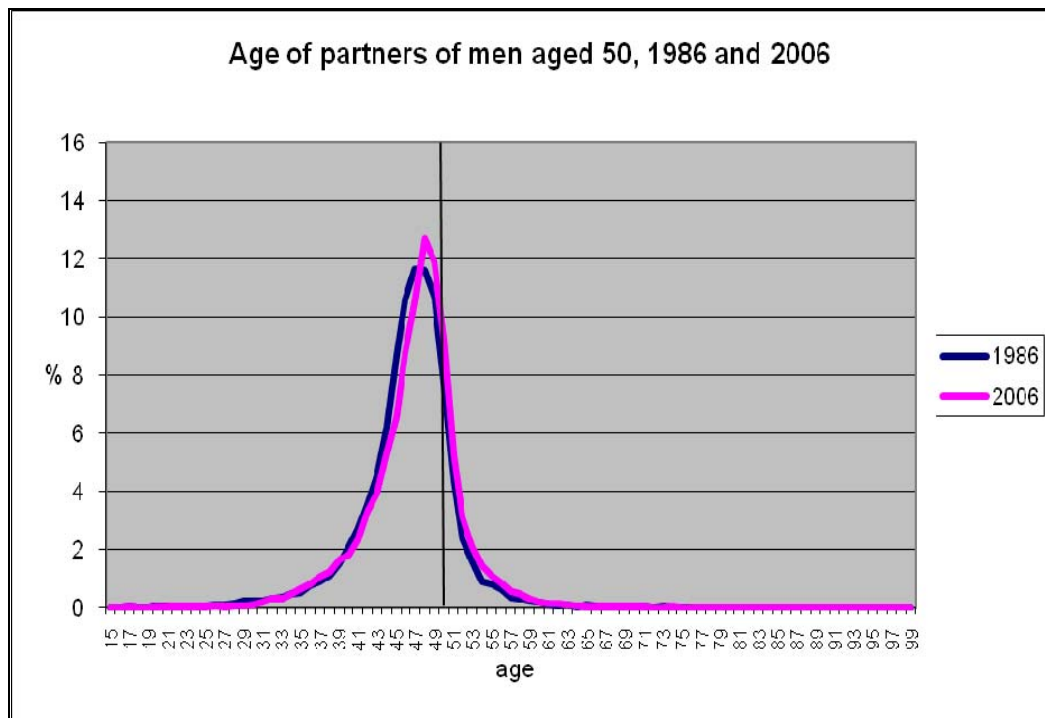
For women aged 50, 1.4% had a partner 10 or more years younger in 1986, increasing to 1.8% in 2006 (Figure 3). For male partners five or more years younger than the women, the figure was 3.9% in 1986, increasing to 6.7% in 2006.

**Figure 3**



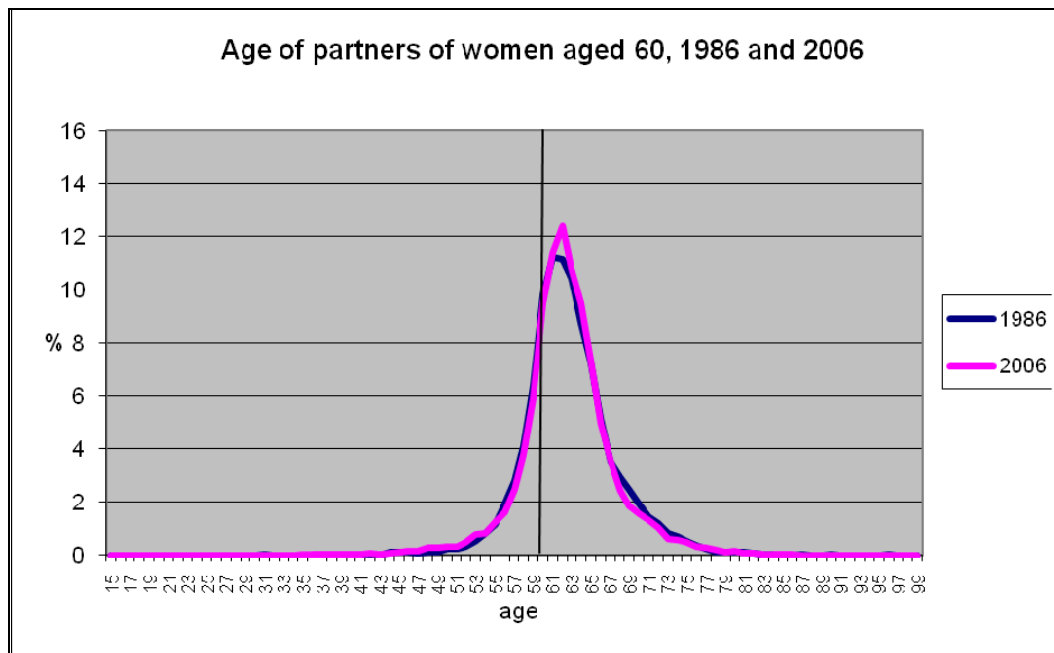
For men aged 50, 9.6% had a partner 10 or more years younger in 1986, decreasing slightly to 9.2% in 2006 (Figure 4). For men aged 50 with a partner five or more years younger, the figures are 35% in 1986, decreasing to 31% in 2006.

Figure 4



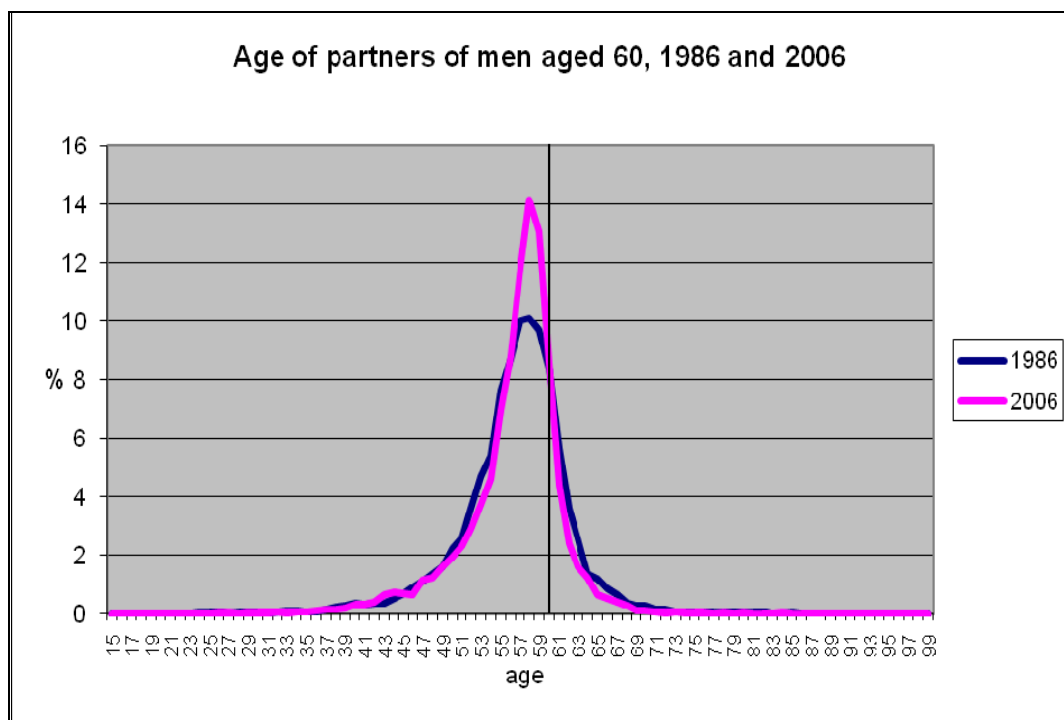
For women aged 60, 1.0% had a partner 10 years or younger in 1986, increasing to 1.7% in 2006 (Figure 5). For women aged 60 with a partner five or more years younger, the figures are 4.0% in 1986, increasing to 5.4% in 2006.

Figure 5



For men aged 60, 11.4% had a partner 10 or more years younger in 1986, but this had declined marginally to 10.8% in 2006 (Figure 6). Equally, the percentage of men aged 60 with a partner five or more years younger declined from 35% in 1986 to 31% in 2006.

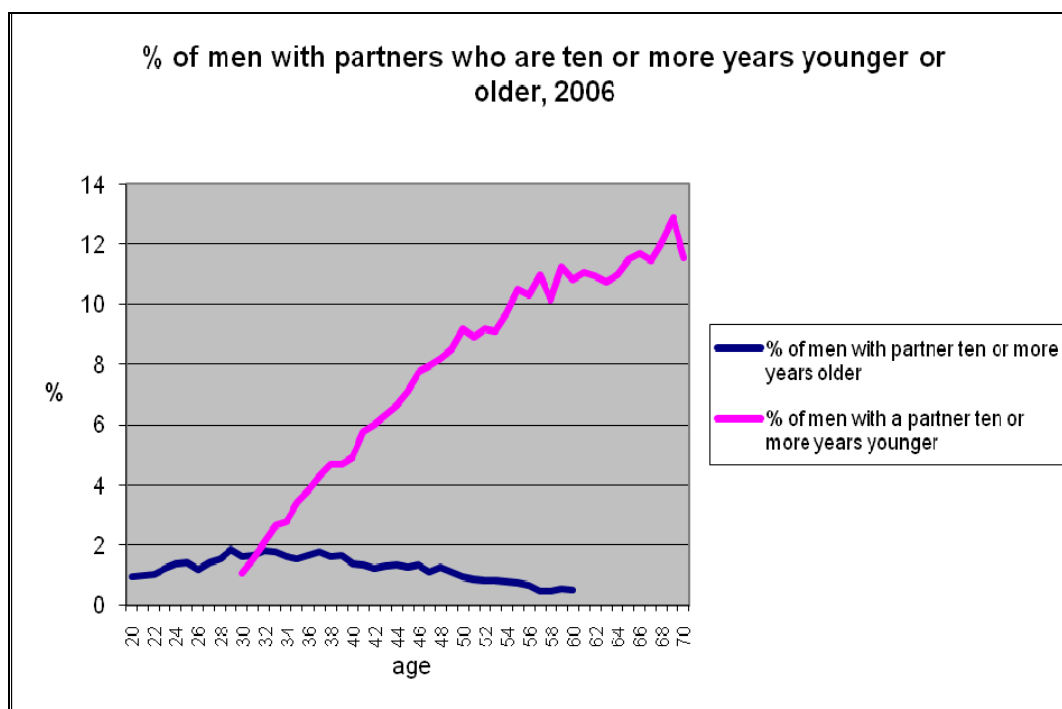
Figure 6



The overall patterns for a 10-year age gap in couples in 2006 is shown in Figure 7. This figure shows that for all ages of men, less than 2% have a partner who is 10 or more years older.

However, the lowest percentage is amongst older men. The opposite situation is seen for men with a partner 10 or more years younger. In this case, it is older men who are most likely to have a significantly younger partner. Although this still represents a minority of men, for men over 50 over a tenth have a partner 10 or more years younger.

**Figure 7**



Based on the census data, cougar women aged 40, 50, and 60 are rare in New Zealand. However, older woman–younger man couples are increasing as a proportion of all couples. In contrast, relationships of men with significantly younger partners are more common, but are still reasonably rare. In addition, the proportion of older man–younger woman relationships is decreasing. What the census data do not show are the more informal relationships and relationships where couples do not live in the same house. For various reasons, researchers suspect there are higher rates of shorter-term relationships where the woman is older than the man, but which do not show up in official statistics.

Finally, how do the official New Zealand data compare with similar data from comparable countries? In a 2009 *New York Times* article, data on legally married couples were drawn from several data sources.<sup>46</sup> This article suggests that between the 1960s and 2007, the proportion of husbands five or more years older than their partner dropped from around a third to just over a quarter of marriages. For husbands 10 or more years older, this rate dropped from about 10% to about 7%. When older wives are considered, the data show that the proportion of couples where the wife was five or more years older was around 4% in the

<sup>46</sup> Kershaw (2009).

1960s increasing to around 6% by 2008. For women 10 or more years older, the rate was rising but still under 2% of all married couples in 2008. These data are broadly similar to the New Zealand data.

### **Further research needed**

Most of the literature on relationships where there is a significant age gap between the partners explores relationships in which the man is the older partner. Relatively little has been written about relationships in which the woman is the older partner. This can, perhaps, be explained by the fact that relationships in which the man is older are still far more common than relationships in which the woman is older, as this type of relationship is still an emerging trend. However, some interesting aspects of this type of relationship should be addressed in further research. Issues around pregnancy and parenting could be explored as these have been identified as areas of concern for men and women. The older woman may not be able to bear children, may have already had children and not want any more, or may not want children. Further research focusing on the men who enter into this type of relationship should also be explored. It would be of interest to look into the longevity of these relationships to determine whether they tend to be short or long term including whether the length of such relationships is strongly influenced by outdated social norms. Research into longevity could also explore intimacy and appearance issues, which are concerns for many women as they age. Lastly, a study comparing the two variations of heterogamous relationships could be undertaken to identify which type of relationship is better suited to men and women in different stages of their lives. For women, research has indicated that younger women prefer older men and vice versa to a certain extent for older women.<sup>47</sup> Overall, this is an area that is untapped for research and deserves further attention.

### **Conclusions**

As demonstrated in this exploratory research note, the social phenomenon of couples where the woman is significantly older than her male partner currently has a high prominence in national and international media and in popular culture. It is also beginning to be examined by the research community and, indeed, further research is warranted. Our initial analysis of census data suggests interest in these couples may be exaggerating the extent of this phenomenon. For a variety of reasons, these couples are an important group and their size does seem to have been growing (albeit marginally) since the 1980s, at least for couples living together in the same households. Like other researchers we suspect the number of older female–younger male couples who form long-term relationships is considerably smaller than the number who have had short-term relationships. Our brief canvassing of theories as to why there may be more cougars emerging suggests there are social and

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<sup>47</sup> Levesque & Caron (2004).

economic reasons for a further expansion of this type of partnering arrangement. There would have always been cougars in many societies, but overall the growth in the older female–younger male couple does represent a break from the traditional partnering pattern among heterosexual couples. With women increasingly better educated than males, there will, inevitably, be far more couples where the woman is better educated and, sometimes, better paid than her partner. It will take time to see if there also continues to be growth in couples where the woman is significantly older than her partner. If there is further major growth, it is likely the somewhat negative predatory term cougar will disappear or at least change its current connotations.

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