



GREAT MYTHS OF INTIMATE RELATIONSHIPS

Dating, Sex, and Marriage

MATTHEW D. JOHNSON

WILEY Blackwell

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For Deanne, with love

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

In October 2010, it was my turn to give a talk to the faculty and students of the Psychology Department at Binghamton University, my academic home. We usually give and hear talks that are heavy on methods and data, and I've given many such talks. However, in October of 2010, I felt like having fun. My dad had died a few months earlier, and I had grown weary of being heavy and serious. I wanted to give a talk that was light and fun. So, on that day in 2010, I gave a talk titled "30 Interesting Empirical Findings about Intimate Relationships in 60 Minutes." It turned out to be the light and fun talk I had hoped for. Sitting in the audience that day was my friend and colleague Steven Jay Lynn, Distinguished Professor of Psychology. Afterward, he invited me to write a book for a series that grew out of his book *50 Great Myths of Popular Psychology* that he wrote with Scott O. Lilienfeld, John Ruscio, and the late Barry L. Beyerstein. This book is the product of that invitation. Therefore, I begin my acknowledgments by thanking Steve. Were it not for him, this book literally would not have been written. Steve has been a supportive and wonderful colleague since he first picked me up from the airport for my job interview in the winter of 1999 in his red sports car. At every step of my career at Binghamton University, Steve has been ready with advice, insight, help, and care. He has made me a better psychologist. For that, he has my deep gratitude.

The psychology faculty at Binghamton University is truly great. I am proud to be a part of it. A few colleagues in particular were instrumental in helping me think about and write this book. Nicole Cameron helped me understand issues involving animal models of sexual and parenting behavior. She is a smart, enthusiastic, and patient teacher. Pete Donovan is always ready to talk with me about any subject. Peter Gerhardstein, Brandon Gibb, and Celia Klin were excellent leaders of the various

academic units to which I belong. All of them were patient and kind as I let other aspects of my work slide while writing this book. I hope each will continue in leadership positions. Ken Kurtz was always interested in my work and wanted to talk about it, even when I didn't. It is nice to have a colleague ask about one's work, thank you. Richard Mattson is the principal investigator on a research project where I am one of the co-investigators. He has been patient and understanding in the face of my professional distraction and disarray. Chris Bishop, Meredith Coles, Cindy Connine, Terry Deak, Gina Fleming, Mary Ellen Gates, Jennifer Gillis, Courtney Ignarri, Albrecht Inhoff, Sarah Laszlo, Mark Lenzenweger, Don Levis, Stephen Lisman, Barbara Luka, Ann Merriwether, Ralph Miller, Vladimir Miskovic, Joe Morrissey, Ann Paludi, Ray Romanczyk, María-Teresa Romero, Lisa Savage, Linda Spear, Skip Spear, Greg Strauss, Pam Turrigiano, Cyma Van Petten, Dave Werner, and Deanne Westerman are all wonderful colleagues who have helped me in ways too numerous to recount here.

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I have been lucky to have truly great teachers throughout my life. Dudley Weiland was my sixth-grade teacher at Peck Elementary in Arvada, Colorado. His intensity and integrity inspired me then and now. In college at the University of Denver, I had the good fortune to work with Bernard Spilka and Howard Markman. Professor Spilka (Bernie) taught me the importance of having a broad education. In his classes and office hours, he wove together philosophy, literature, and science in a way that cemented my path as a psychologist. I started working in Howie's lab as a work-study student coding video tapes of one of his landmark studies. I was immediately hooked on studying intimate relationships. Howie is smart, driven, and generous. Whether we were working in lab (with Mari Clements and Scott Stanley) or playing intramural hockey, I was always learning from Howie (and I still am).

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is truly my academic hero. He has set the bar as a professor, writer, and scientist to which I aspire. What I owe him can never be repaid.

The loss of my father left a hole in my heart and an even bigger hole in my mother's heart. Their marriage continues to inspire me and my mom's resilient grace continues to humble me. My brothers, Steve and Ted, are excellent writers and modeled beautiful prose for me. My sister, Jolene, is a scientist, law enforcement officer, national park ranger, and a trusted confidant. Finally, I should say forthrightly that I was not a good husband while I wrote this book. I spent too many nights and weekends brooding and fretting over it. Perhaps Myth 26 should have been "writing a book about intimate relationships will help you with your own." To Deanne, I say thank you for being with me through difficult times and good times, but mostly thank you for just being present. Being with you calms me, educates me, inspires me, and exhilarates me. Therefore, it is to my wife Deanne that I dedicate this book.

— Matt Johnson

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INTRODUCTION

Overall, how satisfied are you with your life?

How you answer that question is more likely to be predicted by your satisfaction with your current intimate relationship than your satisfaction with any other part of your life. Let me repeat that. Our happiness in life is most closely aligned with our happiness (or lack thereof) with our intimate relationships. So, we had better pay attention to those relationships!

Let me pause for a moment and clarify that by “intimate relationships” I mean close relationships that have, at minimum, the potential for sex, such as one’s relationship with a spouse, girlfriend, or boyfriend. So, I am not talking about parents, children, friends, or coworkers. That being said, some principles of intimate relationships may be applied to other types of relationships. Now that we’ve defined intimate relationships, let’s get back to their importance.

Not only is intimate relationship satisfaction associated with overall life satisfaction (Diener, Gohm, Suh, & Oishi, 2000; Diener, Suh, Lucas, & Smith, 1999), it’s associated with nearly everything we care about. The quality of our intimate relationships is associated with ...

... physical health. The association between intimate relationship quality and physical health is consistent, whether it is measured molecularly (e.g., G. E. Miller, Dopp, Myers, Stevens, & Fahey, 1999) or in terms of morbidity (e.g., Langhinrichsen-Rohling, Snarr, Slep, Heyman, & Foran, 2011). Put simply, the quality of our intimate relationships is a matter of life and death. For example, if you have heart disease, you are

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more likely to live longer being in a good relationship than a bad one (Coyne et al., 2001). Not only is the association between physical health and relationship quality strong, it's consistent across races and ethnicities (McShall & Johnson, 2015b).

... mental health. As with physical health, relationship satisfaction is correlated with mental health. This finding is so strong that marital dysfunction is associated with all but one of the 11 most common mental illnesses (Whisman, 2007), a finding that (like the findings involving physical health) is consistent across racial and ethnic groups (McShall & Johnson, 2015a).

... job performance. Relationship distress is associated with multiple job performance measures, such as tardiness and absenteeism (e.g., Forthofer, Markman, Cox, Stanley, & Kessler, 1996; Leigh & Lust, 1988). This means that there are significant and meaningful monetary correlates of relationship dysfunction at both an individual level and a societal level.

In other words, it's clear that relationships matter. Yet, despite all of the empirical and anecdotal evidence of the importance of intimate relationships, confusion reigns. We can see this confusion in the media and in the ways our friends go about trying to solve their relationship problems.

Goal of the book

The goal of this book is to put a dent in some of the confusion about intimate relationships by tackling 25 persistent myths about these relationships. You will see throughout the book that I have attempted to emphasize data from high-quality scientific articles. There's always a temptation when writing about human behavior to fall back on our own experiences, insights, and judgments. However, these can mislead us. Although there are times to listen to intuition (see Myth 22), some of the most important and fundamental lessons learned in psychology tell us that intuition can mislead. Just as I implore you not to trust your own intuition, I will also implore you not to trust a voice of authority (including mine). There are many supposed experts on intimate relationships, men and women who have written compelling books and made a lot of money talking about relationships. Most of these folks are well meaning and some are quite knowledgeable, but, as with any claims related to science, your mantra should be "show me the data." Therefore, this book is filled with citations. I have tried to back up nearly every claim by citing a

source in which you can check out the scientific support for what I have written. No doubt that by the time this book goes into print, some of the findings I have described will have been upended by new studies or new data that will necessitate a revision of my conclusions. That's OK; in fact that is part of the fun of science, including relationship science. Another fun part of my job is listening to what others think of relationships. So, I encourage you to share your thoughts about the book or about intimate relationships more generally with me by visiting my lab website at marriage.binghamton.edu.

Structure of the book

I organized the book to approximate the developmental course of intimate relationships from myths about sex – the true starting point of development – to myths about attraction and courtship; online dating; same-sex relationships; predictors of relationship success; and, finally, myths about gender differences, discord and dissolution. Each chapter has a brief introduction followed by a discussion of each specific myth. Occasionally, there are side boxes with definitions, theoretical concepts, or marginally related asides. The chapter introductions and side boxes are meant to give a bit more context to the myths and my discussion of the myths.

I hope you find the book helpful.

1 SEX

“Sex.” The very word is loaded. After all, “everything in the world is about sex except sex. Sex is about power.” This quote, which is widely but improbably attributed to Oscar Wilde, captures the sway this topic has on us. Yet, it’s also a topic that is steeped in lore, misunderstanding, and ignorance. More than once, I’ve urged couples in my practice to engage in a course of self-education on the topic of sex because they often report wanting to know more about sex and do more with each other, but are flummoxed by the plumbing and wiring of the human body (to these couples, I recommend Paul Joannides’ excellent 2012 book, titled “Guide to Getting it On,” which is comprehensive and entertaining). Of course, with all of the ignorance and misinformation about sex, there are also myths.

For this chapter, I have selected four myths that are specific to intimate relationships. The first myth is about the persistent belief that women are less sexually minded than men. The second myth is about the “hook-up culture” among college students and young adults. In the third and fourth myths of this chapter, I write about marriages that haven’t been consummated and intimate relationships with very little sexual activity.

There are – of course – other myths about sex in intimate relationships. For example, many are surprised to learn that more than half of men and women in their 60s, 70s, and 80s report being sexually active two or three times a month (Lindau, Schumm, et al., 2007). In fact, there are growing concerns about sexually transmitted diseases spreading among older adults (Caffrey & O’Neill, 2007; cf. Lindau, Laumann, & Levinson, 2007). In any case, the reluctance to talk about sex in the context of

intimate relationships, even among couples therapists (B. W. McCarthy, 2001), leads to myths that need busting.

Myth #1

Men have a stronger libido than women

The strength of the belief that men are more libidinous than women is so ingrained that its validity is assumed (e.g., Mann, 2014). Silly cartoons showing the brain of the man thinking mostly about sex versus the brain of the woman thinking mostly about chocolate or commitment or shopping (see Figure 1) capture this sentiment (see also Myth 21). We've also all heard unsubstantiated facts, such as men think about sex every seven seconds (for a discussion of this myth, see Lilienfeld, Lynn, Ruscio, & Beyerstein, 2009). Of course, this is not true; however, men do think about sex more often than women and men seek out sex even when it's unwise or illegal (Baumeister, 2000; Baumeister, Catanese, & Vohs, 2001). Nevertheless, there are compelling data that we may be underestimating the strength of women's libidos and that our belief in this gender difference is steeped in culture (Lippa, 2009).

The repression of women's sexuality

No discussion of this topic can begin in earnest without talking about the history of women and their sexuality. Throughout history men have described women's sexuality in a way that revealed both the exciting and threatening nature of it. Because men have written most of the texts from the ancient to modern eras, the historical perspective on women's sexuality is necessarily viewed from a detached and masculine point of view. Even in historical writings that describe women as libidinous, one can detect the male perspective. In Paul's first letter to the Corinthians, he makes the point that "the husband should fulfill his wife sexually" (1 Cor. 7:3 New Living Translation). In Greek mythology, Tiresias – who was a man but lived for seven years as a woman – settles a marital argument between Zeus and Hera about who enjoys sex more. Hera claimed it was the man and Zeus claimed it was the woman. Tiresias said that men experience only 10% of the pleasure that women experience. On a side note, Hera was so angry with Tiresias for siding with Zeus that she cursed him with blindness, and Zeus, feeling bad about that, allowed him to live for seven generations and gave him clairvoyance. So it goes with being a marital therapist.