

## **INVERTED MARRIAGES: ACCUSATIONS AND PREJUDICE IN DEVIANT MARITAL ARRANGEMENTS<sup>1</sup>**

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### **ABSTRACT**

Why do some men marry older women? Why do some women choose younger men? What is the main capital behind those marital arrangements? This paper aims to study the female and male discourses of marriages in which women are older than their husbands. My reflection is built upon the data of the research “Body, ageing and happiness”. The results of two focus groups are analysed: the first one includes twelve women that are married to younger men; the second one includes ten men that are married to older women. After the focus groups, nine individual in-depth interviews were conducted with five men and four women. I conducted my research with couples that have been together for at least ten years. These women are at least ten years older than their husbands.

### **KEYWORDS**

Gender; body; ageing; marriage; family

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### **INTRODUCTION**

Why do some men marry older women? Why do some women choose younger men? What is the main capital behind those marital arrangements? What are the existing stigmata and prejudices? What view do others have of these relationships?

This article aims to study the female and male discourses of marriages in which women are older than their husbands. My reflection is built upon the data of the research study “Body, ageing and happiness”. The results of two focus groups are analysed: the first one includes twelve women that are married to younger men; the second one includes ten men that are married to older women. After the focus groups, nine individual in-depth interviews were conducted with five men and four women. I conducted my research with couples that have been together for at least ten years. These women are at least ten years older than their husbands.

All the women surveyed had already been married, they have children from previous marriages (in many cases, the children are the same age as their current husband), they are university graduates and live in the south of Rio de Janeiro. They are lawyers, business managers, psychologists, pharmacists, and physical therapists.

The men surveyed are married for the first time; they have no children and have a university degree. They work as economists, business managers, actors, architects, teachers, military policemen. Before getting married, they had not yet finished their university degree and lived in the north or in the suburbs of Rio de Janeiro.

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If the (young) body is a capital, why do some men prefer older women? If getting married to younger men is considered to be deviant in our culture, why do some women prefer younger men?

### 1. THE (YOUNG) BODY AS CAPITAL

Over the last two decades, I have been constantly faced with the frequency of 'the body' category in the discourse of my interlocutors in my research with middle class men and women of Rio de Janeiro.

It is important to admit that it is not possible to generalise the idea that 'the body' is an important value in the Brazilian culture as a whole. This feeling is much more pronounced within a certain group of the Brazilian middle class and, in particular, among the inhabitants of the city of Rio de Janeiro.

This is a social group that can be described as predominantly white, heterosexual, with higher education, high income, living in the south of Rio de Janeiro, and especially in the most exclusive city neighbourhoods (Leblon, Ipanema, Gávea, Lagoa, Jardim Botânico, Botafogo, Copacabana, Humaitá). These people are part of an economic, intellectual, political and cultural elite in Brazil. They have material and symbolic power, and can, therefore, build and reproduce bodies that are socially legitimated as hegemonic.

The middle class men and women whom I have been researching can be considered avant-garde for many Brazilians, since their behaviour, their discourses and their bodies are valued and reproduced by other population groups. This group consists of bodies that are desired, admired, envied and imitated by others. They are bodies and behaviours that are constantly portrayed as normative in the media, and especially in soap operas, television shows, advertisements, etc.

The worldview and the way of life of this social group have a multiplier effect that goes far beyond their class boundaries, suggesting that it may be useful to reveal more broadly the transformations experienced by the Brazilian society. It cannot be said, however, that the sample that I have been researching has 'typical Brazilian bodies'. But it can be said that 'the body' of the participants in this group is by far 'the body' that is imitated the most by Brazilians in general, and especially by Brazilian women.

As was stated by Marcel Mauss (1974), it is through a 'prestigious imitation' that individuals of each culture build their own bodies and behaviour. For Mauss, the set of habits, customs, beliefs and traditions that characterise a culture also include the body. Thus, the body is culturally construed, and certain attributes and attitudes are valued over others, so that each society has a typical body. This body, which may vary according to the historical and cultural context, is acquired by the members of that society by means of a 'prestigious imitation'. People mimic the acts, attitudes and bodies that have been successful, and which have prestige in their own culture. It is important to stress that this process of imitation is not necessarily a conscious act of the members of each culture.

I began this reflection in the book *Nu & Vestido (Naked & Dressed)* (2002), where I presented an analysis of 1,279 survey responses collected with 835 women and 444 men.

The participants were 17 to 50 years old, had higher education, had an income of more than US\$ 2,000.00, and inhabited the city of Rio de Janeiro. As I focused on gender relations, I attempted to grasp the expectations, affective desires and sexual stereotypes of men and women of different generations. Since 1988, I've been conducting research that has focused on the new conjugalities, sexuality, infidelity and the social construction of the body in the Brazilian culture.

In this paper, I try to resume the topics on which I have reflected over the last years using a new methodology and new questions arising from the changes operated in gender roles. With a view to broaden the spectrum of my previous studies — which included individual in-depth interviews and participant observation, trajectory analysis and media reports — I drafted a script with questions to be addressed in focus groups and in in-depth interviews. These focus on the representations of being man and woman, on the ideal marriage models, on the different experiences of affective and sexual relationships, in an attempt to understand the marital arrangements between an older woman and a younger man.

## 2. THE AGE TABOO: REALITY AND FICTION

The *Washington Post* reported in June 2009 that Brazil is the second country where more people watch television, second only to Britain. According to the newspaper, soap operas have a decisive influence on lifestyle choices of Brazilians. It is indeed hard to reflect on contemporary Brazil without examining the influence of soap operas.

The Inter-American Development Bank published two studies that show the relationship between the consumption of the soap operas produced by Rede Globo and the decline of fertility rates and the increase in divorce rates in the country. One of these studies reported that the fertility rate in Brazil fell sharply in the last fifty years, from more than six children per family in 1960 to less than two in the early twenty-first century. This fall is comparable to that of China, but independent of the adoption of any family planning measures.

The analysis of 115 soap operas produced by Globo between 1965 and 1999 showed that 72% of female leading roles had no children and 21% had only one child. The soap operas portrayed the small, white, healthy and urban consumerist, middle and upper middle class family. The soap operas in Brazil became a powerful medium through which family and affective and sexual relationships were framed. The new marital arrangements, which reverse the dominant logic, have been actively present in the soap operas. In almost all of them, older women fall in love with young men, and vice versa.

In the case of Brazil, many of the most successful, rich and famous women, the 'imitable' women, are actresses of soap operas of Rede Globo, especially those that play leading roles in soaps broadcast in prime time. But models, singers and TV hosts, too, all of whom have 'the (young) body' as their main capital, or one of their most important assets, are subject to imitation.

The bodies and attitudes that are imitated the most in Brazilian culture are, definitely, in the soap operas produced by Rede Globo. They can be seen as a reflection of the

bodies and attitudes existing in society, while, at the same time, showing new attitudes and lifestyles. The plots of the soap operas of Rede Globo gain visibility in the covers of the major Brazilian magazines and newspapers. Numerous soap operas explored controversial topics and raised debates throughout the country, mixing fiction and reality. Clothes, accessories, haircuts, nail polish, and furniture are imitated by those women and men that watch soap operas. Moreover, attitudes and lifestyles also change when broadcast by the soap operas of Globo.

Older women married to younger men is a recurring theme in soap operas, films, novels, gossip columns, etc. It raises reproachful looks, feelings of repulsion and, perhaps, envy. In our culture, these relationships are considered forbidden, reprehensible or unacceptable.

In order to show that this type of relationship is not absolutely new in our culture, prior to initiating the discussion of the group studied it is interesting to recall the case of Chiquinha Gonzaga, songwriter, pianist and first woman who conducted an orchestra in Brazil. She was born in 1847 and had four children. When she was 52, she met João Batista, a 16-year old music apprentice. They fell in love and lived together until the day she died in 1935, aged 87. As she feared the prejudice, Chiquinha pretended that João Batista was her foster son. Many only found about the affair after her death.

If the concept of 'prestigious imitation' is once again taken into account, we can add that some of the most famous women in Brazil are or were married to younger men. The magazine *Veja* (14/05/2010) named famous cases of women that are married to younger men, such as: the TV host Ana Maria Braga, who is married to a man 22 years younger; the singer Elba Ramalho, who used to date a man 33 years younger; the host Marília Gabriela, who, for eight years, was the girlfriend of the 25 years younger actor Reynaldo Gianecchini; the actress Susana Vieira, girlfriend of an actor and magician who is 41 years younger than her; and the singer Elza Soares, who is married to a man 46 years younger.

It is interesting to note that two of the famous women in the news piece of the magazine *Veja*, Susana Vieira and Elza Soares, were the most cited in my research when I asked the participants to cite an example of a famous person who has aged badly. They were ranked first for not 'accepting ageing' and 'behaving inappropriately for their age'. In both cases, the fact that they had a relationship with much younger men is highly criticised. Elza Soares is also highly criticised due to the excessive number of cosmetic surgeries.

The emphasis of the respondents is on the statement that, because they do not accept their age, they both behave inappropriately: they date younger men, they wear clothes that are not appropriate to their age and they take too many cosmetic surgeries.

Another example of bad ageing given in the respondents' answers is that of the actress Vera Fischer. She is mentioned because she doesn't accept her age, she dates younger men, she has had botox, she had cosmetic surgery and, moreover, she is addicted to drugs and alcohol. They state: 'she is troublesome', 'she is always involved in fights and in trouble'. Her behaviour is considered totally inappropriate for a woman that is over 60 years old (she was born in 1951).

The affairs and marriages of older women with younger men have been explored in many recent soap operas. The frequency with which we are faced with the theme of the relationship of older women to a man who could be her son or her daughter's boyfriend, not only in soaps, magazines and newspapers, but also in heated debates, demonstrates that we face a real taboo.

However, some cases of famous women who are married to younger men do not make it very often to the media, and do not seem to cause much controversy. One of these discrete cases is that of the 70-year old actress Marília Pêra, who has been married for 15 years with an economist that is 21 years younger than her. In the news piece entitled 'Love has no age'<sup>2</sup>, she said that she has never been criticised or subject to nasty comment for living with a younger man.

'In my case, there has never been any prejudice. My mother loves him, and so do my children, and I am a great friend with his mother. Those whose opinion matters to me have always been favourable to my decision.'

However, she seems to ward off against any possible accusations of deviation, stating that there is always some kind of interest in any love relationship.

'There may be a game of interests in a relationship of two very young people, it has nothing to do with age. But any relationship, be it of love or passion, is a relationship of interest. The love of a mother for her child is often self-serving. The need to have a partner has at least some underlying interest, since the other brings the advantage of feeling good.'

Marília Pêra also stated that being 21 years older does not make any difference: 'I look at him and see him my age. I don't know whether I see him older, or whether I see myself younger. In addition, he looks older, he's very polite, he's not a big guy; he is a gentleman, conservative, formal.'

### 3. MALE DOMINATION AND MARRIAGE MARKET

Pierre Bourdieu (2010), in 'The masculine domination', argues that most French women wish an older and taller spouse. The author shows that women feel diminished when the partner is shorter or younger than them. Therefore, 'they can only wish and love a man whose dignity is clearly stated and attested in the fact, and by the fact, that 'he overcomes them' visibly' (p. 48).

The demographer Elza Berquó (1998) states that the fact that men marry younger women is an almost universal constant, and is owed to the power relationship between the sexes. Although, in some contexts, gender relations are becoming less asymmetrical, they have not yet had a visible impact on the difference between the ages of men and women when getting married. Berquó states that few studies have been conducted on other trading currencies, besides youth, offered by women and accepted by men in the

<sup>2</sup> <http://mariliaperano.comunidades.net/index.php?pagina=1230984734>

marriage market. The persistence of the age difference, in the case of Brazil, which has a surplus of women of all age groups from 15 years old, has direct consequences on female celibacy and on the expressive group of separated or widowed women with little chance of getting married.

The disadvantage of Brazilian women in the marriage market is striking. The situation becomes increasingly asymmetric as men and women grow older. With ageing, the odds of getting married decrease for women and increase for men.

Berquó shows that the social norm according to which men should marry younger women contributes a lot to the existence of what she called the pyramid of loneliness. Furthermore, the tendency of men who get separated is to remarry even younger women. She believes that in a society where the culture of the body and youth commands, it is very unlikely that a significant number of women relates to much younger men. Not only because these young men would not be interested in them, but mainly because older women would feel insecure and threatened by ageing signs, especially when competing against younger women for the same men.

Depending on the existing prejudices, Brazilian women look at the age groups older than them when looking for a lover. Conversely, men look down, searching for a younger partner. Therefore, the existence of an age taboo restrains the odds of a Brazilian woman marrying or remarrying when she is older. However, the situation of the marriage market is changing and women are increasingly looking at younger age groups for a loving partner.

IBGE shows an increase in the number of partnerships in which women are older than men. According to the National Sample Survey of Households (PNAD), between 1996 and 2006 these partnerships increased from 5.6 to 7.6 million, which accounts for an increase of 36%. And they continue to grow. In most instances in which the woman is older than her partner, the age difference is usually small. According to PNAD, 64.7% out of the 7.6 million couples in this situation, i.e. 4.9 million couples, consist of spouses with a difference of 1 to 4 years. Other 1.75 million, or 23.2%, have a difference of 5 to 9 years. The third group is the one that has a difference of 10 to 14 years: 592 thousand, or 7.7% of the total amount. In the period surveyed, the number of families in which the woman lives with someone who is more than ten years younger increased 59.5%, from 585 thousand to 927 thousand.

The survey also reveals that families in which the woman is older and works subvert the rule that it is always the man who earns more. PNAD shows that the difference in the income within the couple increases as the age difference increases. Men who are married to 30 year older women earn, in average, 25% of their income. This is because a mature woman, who has built a career over decades, may have already reached a level of professional recognition that a young man has not yet achieved. By analysing the average schooling of the couples, the study revealed that the woman, in these cases, usually has 1.4 years of schooling in excess of her partner. What would explain the increase of this type of marital arrangement?

#### **4. THE MALE DISCOURSE: SHE IS SPECIAL**

By analysing the logic of male discourses, it is easy to see that the emphasis is placed on the distinction between their wives and the other women. For them, their wives are more loving, more generous and more joyful than younger women. They are also livelier, they adopt a more positive behaviour and have a younger attitude than them.

It is very interesting to note a certain discourse structure about the love choice in the men's statements. It is clear that, for them, their wives are not like any woman, and what differentiates them from other women is the fact that they are older. They have certain features in common that make them special. These features can be explained by the fact that they are older, while not being directly bound to their age.

A fact that is worth noting is that the respondents do not have what could be called a deviant career choice in their previous relationships, that is, they are not men who have always had relationships with older women. They emphasise that, before them, they have always had relationships with women that are younger than them.

So, why did they choose older women? Men's responses focus on three main features:

1. She is caring;
2. She is young at heart;
3. She is greater.

##### **4.1 SHE IS CARING**

The respondents highlight the ability to care as the main feature of their wives. They are extremely accessible women, they are thoughtful and dedicated, not only to them, but also to their children, friends, relatives, parents, neighbours, work colleagues, etc.

These women solve everyone else's problems, they are the core of household care as a whole, especially of their children and grandchildren, and they are much sought after to solve problems and give advice to friends and relatives. They demonstrate being jealous of the attention and the time that they dedicate to 'others', stating that they wish more time and attention 'to themselves'.

Care, which is translated into the affection, attention, availability and dedication of their wives to them, can be considered the most important asset of these relationships.

Diana Neves (2011) stresses that, for the respondents, older women are different from younger women in their ability to welcome and provide guidance, which translates into words like: safe haven, peace, cuddle, guidance, wisdom, experience, balm, security, support, understanding, seriousness, help, base, trust, friendship, calmness, partnership, companionship, complicity and, especially, care, affection, attention, experience and maturity.

'I don't know if I'll have the grounding to be a safe haven in someone else's life, someone who's accustomed to such a woman, with that support, not

that I'm dependent, but she always has a way of doing the best in every instance.' (R 36, wife 56)

Neves stresses that the respondents identify a positive change in their lives after meeting their wives, that is similar to the 'before and after' formula. They state that: 'She taught me how to be more relaxed and social'; 'I became much more responsible, and far more focused on my career'; 'she changed my life'; 'she saved my life'.

'I had a tumour removed when we'd been together for six months only. She dropped everything, her job, to stay with me. She used to say: 'no matter what, he is mine, I'm the one who will take care of him'. She had a good salary, and she dropped it all just to stay with me. This was a gift from God.' (R 36, wife 56)

'I was rather mad, I had a bike, I hanged out with a kind of crazy crowd and was very flirtatious. She rescued me from a lot of trouble, I was riding a bike while under the influence of alcohol, I fell off the bike, I was in hospital for six months, unable to walk. I don't go out anymore. She tells me to go to the beach; I buy beer and stay home, maybe because I experienced a near-death situation.' (A 34, wife 56)

Such changes do not appear to have been a result of their demands, as was stated by Neves. These men see in their wives qualities like experience, wisdom, support and guidance. For the author, it is possible that they may have felt encouraged to change, maybe to become better people for them.

'She made me feel comfortable: 'the day you have to settle, you will settle', and things have gradually changed, I felt like building something because I was getting an increasingly greater support. Young women on the street draw my attention, I look because I'm a man, she passes by, swaying, but I think about the support that I get from my wife. I loved partying, drinking, showing off, getting involved with worthless people, she talked to me, she never made any demands.' (H 31, wife 42)

#### **4.2 SHE IS YOUNG AT HEART**

Many respondents are the same age as their wives' children and, moreover, their wives call them children: 'My wife is so helpful that if I call her to come get me, she comes to get me. She calls me son.' (E 40, wife 56). They seek to emphasize that it is not a maternal, but rather a man-woman relationship, and that they react when others think they are their wives' children.

'I've heard a girl say, in the mall, as my wife was looking at some sandals: 'that lady is picking up some sandals for her son'. I kissed her there and then, so that everyone knew that I was her husband.' (E 40, wife 56)



‘Nowadays, people are used to it, but they used to ask: ‘is he your son?’ She was embarrassed, I wasn’t; I couldn’t be bothered, and used to say: ‘I’m her eldest’, joking; then I kissed her on the mouth.’ (A 34, wife 56)

Indeed, all those surveyed report being older than their wives. Their wives are ‘young at heart’: they are extroverted, lively, fun, energetic, they love going out, dancing, and going for a walk. Conversely, the husbands prefer to stay at home, watching television or having a beer: ‘What I like the most is her way of being happy, she cheers you up, she’s always fooling around. I’m a lot quieter, she’s always up to action. She’s young at heart, more than me, because I’m older, my spirit is older than hers. She’s more cheerful.’ (A 34, wife 56)

The respondents stated that their wives worried a lot more about their age and their looks than they do:

‘My wife is going through a depression, she has a great body, because she goes to the gym, but her face is showing some signs, it isn’t much worth hiding them. She keeps asking: ‘will you still want me when I’m 65?’ ‘Of course, you’ll still be the same babe’. She’s obsessed about asking whether I want her to turn off the lights when we have sex. No need to, I like the lights on, it’s even better if there is a mirror.’ (E 40, wife 56)

‘She even tries to hide some things. I don’t really care, but you can feel that she’s kind of tense, and she asks me to be straight with her: ‘When you no longer feel attracted to me, tell me and I’ll understand.’ (J 25, wife 41)

They seem not to see, or rather not to care about the signs of age or their wives’ defects: ‘Sometimes I see her fearful, she says that she’s getting old, it’s just that this isn’t what I see, I see her essence, I don’t see her skin, if it’s soft, it’s all perfect to me. I don’t see any defects, but I feel her concern, that she will soon turn 60 years old. I say: ‘You look beautiful! Why do you want to do a boob job? You don’t need to, your breasts are beautiful. Are you doing it for someone else?’ ‘No, I’m doing it for you.’ ‘If you’re doing it for me, just leave it the way it is’. She doesn’t take it out of her mind, she’ll save enough money to do that. But for me there’s no need to.’ (R 36, wife 56)

They do not consider their wives older than them, which can be explained by the idea of playfulness that is associated with traits such as sense of humour, joy, optimism, and energy.

#### **4.3 SHE IS GREATER**

The number of positive attributes that they associate with their wives is extraordinary. The respondents stress that they are: charismatic, generous, loving, caring, dedicated, friendly, fun, cheerful, high-spirited, funny, laughing, playful, lively, understanding, partners, companions, available, joyful, among many other positive things. One of them even goes on to say: ‘She has no defects. For me, she’s the most perfect woman in the

world'. 'I think that intelligence is an aphrodisiac. My wife guides me, she enlightens me a lot, she's a very wise person, she's very experienced, she's my balm. I rest my mind quietly, feeling secure. We get along very well sexually, our ideas and our values are very similar.' (R 36, wife 56)

The male discourse about their wives is one of permanent love, admiration, respect, interest and, often, gratitude. Their wives are the ones who hold the main capital of the relationship. They are special precisely because they are older, more experienced, mature, and secure. For their husbands, this capital is much more important in a love relationship than female youth. In this sense, these women are far greater than any other woman, even those that are younger and more beautiful: 'I'm afraid of losing her, where will I find a woman like her?' (E 40, wife 56)

For the husbands, female youth is not a value, but a lack of value. Female youth means settlings, insecurity, immaturity, faults, and childishness. More mature women are able to give them much more:

'Older women are more sensual than the younger ones. 18-year-old girls are more careless, they want to wear flip-flops, while more mature women are tidier, more elegant, more fragrant.' (E 40, wife 56)

'She loves to please me. She likes buying my clothes, doing my nails, doing my feet. She likes feeding me. When I'm asleep, she walks on her toes, she doesn't let anyone make noise, she takes the phone off the hook. She always goes into the trouble of cooking the meals I like. She does all she can to please me. Would a younger woman ever do that?' (R 36, wife 55)

'Owing to the fact that she's more experienced, she doesn't push it. Younger women push it a lot.' (J 25, wife 41)

## 5. THE FEMALE DISCOURSE: HE MAKES ME FEEL SPECIAL

The analysis of the female discourses makes it easy to understand that they foreground the fact that these women feel special to their husbands. They claim that their husbands depend on them, that they seek their full-time attention, that they feel jealous of them. It is very interesting to note that the main capital for the men are the features related to 'what the women are', whereas the female discourse is focused on what 'he makes me feel'.

The main qualities of their husbands lie with the fact that their husbands make them feel that they are special and greater than the other women, especially younger ones.

1. He makes me feel special;
2. He makes me feel young;
3. He makes me feel safe.

### **5.1 HE MAKES ME FEEL SPECIAL**

Interestingly, as Neves demonstrates, the women surveyed talk a lot more about themselves than about their husbands, unlike the husbands, who spend more time talking about the positive attributes of their wives. They are very self-praising, apparently wishing to justify their husband's interest in them, as if it were necessary to compensate for their lack of youth with an excess of other attributes.

The compliments that they make themselves seem to work as a compensation mechanism: the fact that they are older and therefore having several qualities that younger women lack makes them special or even 'greater' women. In this sense, it can be said that they transform the lack of youth into a virtue. Or, as Erving Goffman (1975) would argue, they manipulate the possible stigmata to produce a situation of greatness.

In a way, they resort to the same self-justifying mechanism as those women who have an affair with married men (Goldenberg, 2009). The mistresses that I surveyed state being greater than the betrayed wives because they are unique and special to their lovers, emphasizing that they have an affair with them out of desire, rather than out of family or social obligations. They highlight the no-obligation relationships, as well as the fact that their lovers choose to have an affair with them out of pleasure and companionship, without any financial or other dependence.

Women who are married to younger men also have the same kind of self-justifying discourse:

'I think it's a matter of attitude, of being secure. He knows I have an affair with him because I want to, and that when I no longer want to, I'll leave.'  
(D 39, husband 28)

'From the perspective of sensuality, a woman our age knows her body much better, she knows what she sexually wants more than a 23-year old girl.'  
(K 46, husband 35)

They emphasise that they receive many compliments from their husbands.

'He praises me a lot. Sometimes I say I'm full of faults. I cook some food, he always says it's delicious, he says that I don't have any faults, I don't have cellulitis. I don't get worried. Sometimes I see my acquaintances' concern and recall the striking difference between us. He keeps saying: 'Everything you do is perfect.' I ask him to point out my faults so I can improve on them, but he keeps saying I don't have any defects.'  
(C 56, husband 36)

'He always praises me. I look awful and he says: 'You're beautiful, you're just beautiful no matter what'. I look myself in the mirror and I see an old wrinkled woman. 'Let it go.' He is jealous, the phone rings: 'Who's calling you?'"  
(G 56, husband 34)

As I emphasized elsewhere (Goldenberg, 2008; 2010), the Brazilian women want to be the only one in a man's life. For them the primary male quality is the ability to make them feel special in an extremely competitive marriage market: 'I think the respect, the love he has for me, and we like the same things. He admires me a lot and respects me for being more secure.' (M 50, husband 35)

A husband is a real capital in a marriage market in which the amount of men available is scarce (Goldenberg, 2010). The female competition for a husband, especially in the age group of those surveyed, is very big. They then emphasize their own superiority and worth in this competitive market to justify their husband's choice for them, amid such a large supply of younger women.

### **5.2 HE MAKES ME FEEL YOUNG**

The female discourse is identical to the male discourse: both concur that he is the old one in the relationship, not her.

It is interesting to observe how those women surveyed are keen to claim that the husbands are older than them, that they have 'the mind of an old man', and that they behave like old men. Indeed, they are younger than their husbands, as far as behaviour, personality and mind are concerned: 'He's the one who has an old mind, he just likes old stuff, starting with me. The songs are old, sad, he doesn't like going to the theatre, to the cinema, he doesn't like going out, visiting other people, going for a walk. He eats steak and fries every day, he doesn't like going out to eat, he doesn't like having fun.' (G 56, husband 34)

Chronological age, in this case, matters less than the young mind or behaviour: active, joyful, available, communicative, social and partying: 'My situation is kind of stark, I'm 56, my husband is 36. But I think it's just the temper, the mood, the way you see life. Because at home he is the old one, because I want to do all sorts of things, I wake up bearing a smile from ear to ear, all is well with me, I don't care about distance, I don't mind going to popular festivals, and he does. He is more shy, quieter, he's always been like that.' (C 56, husband 36)

### **5.3 HE MAKES ME FEEL SAFE**

All the women surveyed state that their relationship started as a joke with no expectations and commitments. They did not think about the future and believed that the relationship would not last long. They just wanted to have fun and enjoy the moment. Depending on the age difference, they used to think that the relationship would end quickly and that they would soon find a younger girlfriend. However, the occasional relationship unintentionally transformed into a lasting relationship.

We may be led into thinking that the very fact that the relationship was seen by them as fooling around ended up strengthening the love and admiration that the men felt for them. All the male respondents highlighted their wives' lightness, sense of humour and joy as key qualities that set them apart from younger women, who are deemed insecure, controlling, obsessed, gooeey and childish.

The wives say that they feel safe with their husbands. They stress that their husbands are the ones who feel jealous, not them, which demonstrates that the men are the one who feel more insecure:

‘We don’t fight, there are no problems of infidelity. On the day the age hits, we’ll sit down and talk, we’re going to live one day at a time. No feeling of insecurity. If a woman gazes at him, I feel jealous, but I look at her, I check whether she’s in good shape to make the comparison that we all women do. If she is, I hold my cookie and bring him home. I was jealous of the people I dated when I was younger, not of him.’ (C 56, husband 36)

‘I’m not jealous of him, but he is very jealous of me. When I’m at work, I ring him: ‘Go to the beach, go see some buttocks’. He replies: ‘No, I don’t want to, I want to stay home, I’ll see yours when you get home’. He’s great with me, he’s a great partner. I work in the morning and he works in the afternoon, he stays home and does the laundry, he tidies the house, he washes the windows, and then he says: ‘I’ve taken care of everything so that you can get home and watch TV, don’t go out. Wait for me, and in the evening I’ll hump you’.’ (G 56, husband 34)

They say that their husbands are needy and feel jealous of the attention that their wives devote to other people: their children, grandchildren, friends, relatives, etc. The husbands want to be the centre of their attention: ‘My husband is the age of my children. At first, they wouldn’t believe, no one does. If you tell me that a 56-year old woman has a 36-year old husband. But I don’t care, we must be happy, no one can be unhappy just to please other people. But there is some jealousy. He’s very jealous of the attention I give to my children and grandchildren. Juvenile implications. He competes against them. He wants attention, affection and care for him alone. If I cook something special for my children, I have to cook something for him as well. He seems like a spoiled child’.’ (C 56, husband 36); ‘He likes to feel important, he likes my paying attention to him and I don’t see it as a maternal need for comfort, because sometimes the need of women as mothers, the one who makes the tea, who lays the food on the table, but he likes being given this attention, being pampered, being praised. He demands a lot more of me than I do of him.’ (G 56, husband 34)

### **5.3 THE HELL IS THE OTHER WOMEN**

For the women surveyed, the gaze of the others at the couple is a cause for embarrassment and shame. The men seem unfazed by what others think, and don’t even seem to pay attention to this gaze. It is as if they were much more vulnerable and attentive to the slightest sign of social disapproval:

‘When we go to the supermarket, women look at us like we had just arrived from another planet. I feel ashamed, and he is very affectionate, those women keep gazing at us and I don’t know where to hide my head.’ (D 50, husband 32)

'I was ashamed of kissing him on the street, I felt bad, as if I was doing something terrible, wrong. He hugged me and I felt as if he were my child, I didn't want to feel that way, on the street. But it was sheer prejudice.' (V 49, husband 39)

The women surveyed believe that they are thought to financially support their husbands, which may seem like the only reason for men to get married. There seems to be, on their part, a need to justify the marriage for other 'more noble' reasons; 'I have the impression that when I walked by with him the neighbours thought: 'She must earn much more than him, she is financially supporting him'.' (V 49, husband 39); 'No matter how hard he works, people always get the impression that I support him. As I'm older, I seem to have more money. Other people think that I support him. But he's got his job and earns more than I do.' (D 50, husband 32)

Their friends also showed some concern and prejudice about the women surveyed marrying younger men.:

'I've heard it loud and clear, when he was at University, that I was the one who paid the bills. I heard my own mother and my friends saying that he was dating me just out of interest, that it was nothing serious.' (L 38, husband 28)

'You see! He thinks that you are well off because you live in Leme, that you'll financially support him!' This is all too common, people really think that way. Including my friends. They used to say that I deserved better, some of them even stopped talking to me.' (F 51, husband 41)

They report numerous situations in which the husband is mistaken for a son: 'I went out and the other people, I felt embarrassed, they asked me if he was my son. Sometimes I said he was.' (G 56, husband 34)

In this confrontation with the gaze of the other, the men are those responsible for enforcing the role of husband, as they seem to care less about other people's judgments: 'Due to his age, I always called him my son. He responded: 'I'm not your son, what a craze! I'm your husband, you have to treat me as your husband, not as your son. You don't have to say that I'm your son, I'm your husband.' Since then I became less fearful.' (G 56, husband 34)

Perhaps Brazilian men care less about other people's judgments than women, who are expected, as Pierre Bourdieu (2010) argued, to be submissive, discrete, restrained, as they are shaped themselves as a symbolic object, whose being exists through and for the gaze of others. For the author, the woman's dignity is partly confirmed by the fact that the man takes on the dominant role in the couple, at least apparently, including an older age.

The women surveyed showed that the biggest obstacles to the relationship originated in their mothers and mothers-in-law. Their daughters, who are often the same age as their husbands, picked many fights and brought along difficult situations, especially in the beginning of the relationship:

‘In the beginning, my daughter was against it: ‘mom, you’re crazy, don’t you see that he’s too young?’ ‘I’m just dating him.’ She rejected it for a little, as daughters do.’ (V 49, husband 39)

‘My daughter is 33 and he is 32. When she met him: ‘is he your son?’ I said: ‘I have no sons.’ (D 50, husband 32)

As Neves stated, their mothers could be led into believing that they could get hurt because younger men would just look for sex, have fun, and then leave: ‘To this day my mother says: ‘You’re much older than him, so this is just casual.’ I have always put her in her place: ‘You had your story, I’m so sorry if you wanted to have a little housewife life; I don’t, any longer, I want to be happy until the last minute of my life.’ (A 48, husband 33)

Neves suggests that the advice given to the women surveyed by their mothers assume that the man is one who has fun and the woman the one that gets hurt. Therefore, fun would be something that is not equal between the sexes within affective and sexual relationships: ‘My mother used to say that he just wanted to play, but I just wanted to play, too. I didn’t want a serious relationship, I met him out one night. ‘I’ll doink this guy, then I won’t ever see him again, anyway.’ Only I think he liked the doinks, so we kept going out until this day.’ (K 46, husband 35); ‘You’re too old for him! Don’t you feel ashamed?’ Basically, I did, I felt ashamed and I was fearful. Everyone used to say: ‘He’s so young, do you really think that he’ll want to have something with you? He’ll want a good life.’ (G 56, husband 34); ‘My mother kept saying: ‘You’re much older than him, so this is just casual. He won’t take it seriously, ever.’ (A 48, husband 33)

Their mothers-in-law, their husbands’ mothers, were also obstacles that had to be overcome.

‘I get along much better with his father than with his mother. His father has always treated me well, but his mother kept saying, provocatively: ‘My son will have to give me a grandchild’.’ (G 56, husband 34)

‘The hardest part was convincing his mother that he would be with an older woman that can no longer have children. His mother said: ‘How can you stay with her, she can’t give you any children.’ In the future he may think: ‘I lived my whole life and haven’t left any marks, I don’t have any children.’ I’m afraid that he might want to have children. I wanted to adopt a child but he said: ‘We have your granddaughters, I see no need to adopt any children.’ (V 49, husband 39)

‘His mother showed a lot of resistance: ‘An older woman, what does she want from my baby?’ What’s more is that he was at university. I don’t really care what people say; I care a lot more about what I think. At first, people made only jokes, saying for example that I had to have botox earlier than expected. His mother is not much older than me. She’s 47, she’s a young

woman, too. She's separated from her husband and pinned all her dreams on her son, and suddenly I went there and took him from her. She came up with the botox joke, in a manner of saying: 'My son will look younger for a longer time and you'll look old'. I replied: 'But I'll never have botox because beauty just ends'. She realised I wasn't just flirting with him, just as he wasn't flirting with me.' (L 38, husband 28)

Neves hypothesises that those who are closer to each other have the courage to say what they think, as well as to express what is most cruel in the social imagination. According to the author, a second hypothesis would consist of seeing such warnings as a concern that sought to avoid their suffering, considering the case of social judgments. The women in both their and their husbands' families seem to materialise the more general negative representations about the relationships between younger men and older women.

As is argued by Howard Becker (1966), there is no reason to assume that only those that commit a deviant act have the urge or the desire to do so. According to him, it is very likely that many individuals have the desire to adopt a deviant behaviour. At least in our fantasies, we all are much more devious than we seem.

The author believes that, rather than asking why those that are seen as devious want to do forbidden things, we should ask why is it that most people do not fulfil their devious desires.

According to Becker, social groups create the deviance by making the rules and applying those rules to particular people, labelling them as marginal or devious. Therefore, the deviation is not a feature of the act performed, but rather a consequence of the application of rules and sanctions to a wrongdoer by others. The deviant behaviour is the one that others label as such.

It can be seen, in the couples surveyed, that the women interiorise the deviance charges, feeling embarrassed and ashamed, or creating obstacles to the marriages in which they are older than their husbands. In the male discourse, the deviance charges are not internalised. They do not talk about shame or embarrassment. They do not raise any obstacles. They may perceive themselves as being different from most men, but not as devious. This difference is perceived by them as something positive, because they believe that they are married to very special women, who are greater than most women. This is a striking difference, a trace of superiority, and a source of pride, not shame.

It is interesting to note that the greatest prejudice against this kind of marriage derives precisely from women. As the statements reveal, women themselves are the ones that run contrary to this type of marital arrangement, not men. They are the ones who feel more insecure, ashamed or embarrassed for marrying a younger man, and they, too, are the ones that raise more obstacles.

This suggests that the age taboo is something essentially feminine. Women are the ones who show more prominently constraint and concern for the fact that they are older than their husbands. Although they are the ones that are most affected by prejudice and accusations, women are the ones who more strongly resist the destruction of the age taboo.



## 6. RECIPROCATION + RECOGNITION: THE SECRET TO A HAPPY MARRIAGE

Elsewhere (Goldenberg, 2008; 2010) I demonstrated that women complain a lot about their partners and state that they would like them to be more considerate, romantic, available, respectful, appreciative, etc. Moreover, men would like their partners to be less annoying, jealous, gooeey, dependent, demanding, perfectionist, etc.

The couples surveyed seem to find a compensatory logic, as they reverse the logic of male domination, which, according to Bourdieu (2010), requires that men are superior to women in age as in other features (such as power, prestige, money, etc.). Women are older, but they are considered to be less annoying, less childish, less jealous, less burdensome, less complaining, less gooeey, less insecure, less obsessed, etc. Men are younger, but they are more attentive, more romantic, more affectionate, more dedicated, more faithful, etc.

What can be observed in the statements analysed is that the worth of the women in their marriages seems to lie with qualities other than the young body. Their main capital is their ability to teach something, to change the worldview, to guide, in addition to their ability for taking care, for their companionship, affection, attention and understanding. Women are charismatic, good-humoured, cheerful, joyful, they are considered to be extremely generous and available to their husbands, as well as to their relatives and friends.

Odd as it may seem, despite this type of relationship being considered unequal, I observed a rather balanced situation involving the surveyed men and women. The women appear to be perceived as trying much harder than men in terms of social rank, maturity, experience, care, affection, attention, etc. However, men give them what Brazilian women want most: a sense of being unique and special. They are appraised, admired and constantly given a proof of their superiority when compared to younger women.

The men recurrently resort to the idea of 'salvation' to justify their love for their wives. Especially early in the relationship the men say that their wives 'saved' their lives, by guiding them in a better direction, by taking care of them, by helping them stay away from drugs and bad company. Many of them said that before they met their wives, they 'were lost in the world'. Furthermore, the very idea of 'salvation' can be applied to the women: the men saved them from their invisibility in an affective and sexual market that values female youth.

'Salvation' is an interesting word to apply to male and female discourse. The women 'saved' their husbands from drugs, bad company, binge drinking and perhaps early death. The women saw in their husbands the possibility of being better people, of studying, working, having a family and a happy life. These women saw in their partners what was invisible to themselves and to others. These men are grateful for this recognition. They, conversely, 'saved' their women from social invisibility. They saw in them essentially superior women, thus not valuing the youthful looks. These men showed that other values and attributes are much more important for a sound relationship. They, too, saw in them what is invisible and unappreciated by others, and, in many instances, by the women themselves. They 'saved' their wives from 'symbolic death' or 'social death'. These women are grateful for this recognition. And both 'saved' their marriages from

routine, from wear and tear, from 'sameness', from accommodation, from the 'death' of love, from the end of admiration. Both feel fully satisfied and recognised.

A relationship that has to face the age taboo, that has to overcome family obstacles and battle insecurities, prejudice and accusations appears to be much more satisfying than more socially acceptable relationships. They both, man and woman, try their best, and not their worst, with their spouse as is the case of many marriages that I studied (Goldenberg, 2008). The men surveyed do not have the same sense of security and stability that causes the wear and tear underlying the daily routine, the 'sameness' and the accommodation, of many marriages. Both need to 'try harder' than conventional couples to stay together.

In an extremely disadvantageous affective and sexual market for women, especially for those in the age group of the women surveyed, having a passionate and faithful husband is a reason for satisfaction. The husband, in this case, is an even more valued asset due to the fact that he chose an older woman when he could have chosen a younger one from a range of possibilities in the marriage market. The women surveyed feel doubly powerful: on the one hand, they have the marital capital, and, on the other, they are considered to be more interesting and desirable than younger women. Furthermore, in a culture where the body is an asset, these women feel that they have not lost their worth because they have aged. Rather on the contrary, they feel that they gained love, admiration and recognition for other types of capital that they have amassed throughout their lives.

As was argued by Elza Berquó (1998), very few studies have been conducted on other trading currencies, besides youth, offered by women and accepted by men in the marriage market. I hope this work has contributed to the discussion of the many other extremely valuable trading currencies in contemporary affective and sexual relationships. I believe that it can be stated, by resorting to the cases studied, that for many Brazilian men, the main asset of a happy marriage is something that can only be found in an older woman. However, many women do not recognise the worth of their own experience, maturity and all they conquered throughout their lives. They consequently suffer excessively from the passage of time.

As I realised the satisfaction of the couples surveyed, I found that, rather than asking why certain men marry older women, I should investigate the reasons why most Brazilian men still prefer getting married to younger women. I should also investigate the reasons why most Brazilian women are led into accepting and reinforcing the age taboo, resorting to their fears, insecurity and prejudice.

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