

# F

## Female Age as a Predictor of Men's Aggression Against Women



Rachel M. James, Todd K. Shackelford and Viviana Weekes-Shackelford  
Department of Psychology, Oakland University,  
Rochester, MI, USA

### Synonyms

[Homicide](#); [Intimate partner violence](#); [Mate retention behavior](#); [Physical aggression](#); [Rape](#); [Sexual aggression](#); [Stalking](#)

### Definition

Men use various forms of physical (homicide and intimate partner abuse) and sexual (rape and sexual coercion) aggression against women to control female sexuality and circumvent female sexual choice. Female age predicts physical and sexual forms of men's violence. Young, fertile women, as compared to older women, are reproductive commodities and, thus, are the primary targets of men's aggression.

### Introduction

Men have evolved a sexual preference for youthful, reproductive-age women. Men's sexual preference for younger women is one feature of human male sexual strategy (Kenrick and Keefe 1992; Thornhill and Palmer 2000). Youthfulness is a reliable indicator of fertility. Ancestral men who were primarily attracted to fertile women thereby increased their reproductive success. Additionally, young women are more valuable to men as mates. Men report that youth is one of the most important characteristics in a partner, across 37 cultures (Buss 1989). Buss (1989) found that men in *all* 37 cultures rate youthfulness as a highly desirable trait in a marriage partner. On average, and across cultures, men prefer a mate that is roughly 24 years old, an age near women's peak reproductive value, or expected future reproduction. Youthfulness is an important trait among men's preference not only for long-term mates but also for short-term mates. Across five cultures, younger female escorts advertise a higher fee for their services, compared to older escorts (Dunn 2018). Given an evolved desire for youth, men are willing to pay younger escorts more money than older escorts. Younger escorts present more observable signs of fertility and reproductive value than do older escorts and therefore can charge and are paid more.

Men use sexual and physical aggression against women to deter rivals, secure sexual access, circumvent female sexual choice, and minimize investment for sexual access. Men may use physical aggression, such as partner violence, to dissuade a woman from desertion or infidelity. Sometimes, however, men kill their partners to thwart abandonment or cuckoldry. Men use sexual aggression, such as rape, to secure sexual access without providing investment or resources. Men's use of aggression is an aspect of a sexual strategy designed to control women's sexual behavior to thereby secure exclusive sexual access to her. Given men's preference for youth and fertility, men primarily use aggression against younger women.

Men with younger, reproductive-age partners are more likely to inflict violence on them to control their sexual behavior (Smuts 1992). Young women are more fertile and are more likely to reproduce than are older women. Whereas women can be certain that an offspring is their genetic kin, men can be deceived into providing resources and investment to an offspring that is not their genetic kin. Younger women pose greater risk than do older women to men's reproductive success: the costs of a reproductive-age women's sexual infidelity or desertion are more devastating to men, as compared to an older partner's deceptions. Older women can no longer reproduce and cannot cuckold or trick a man into investing resources into a child that is not his genetic kin. Thus, the prospects of sexual infidelity and paternity uncertainty/cuckoldry motivate men's aggression against *younger* women more frequently than against older women. To avoid being deceived into raising genetically unrelated offspring, men deter women with violence. Ancestral men who successfully used aggression against younger women, thereby convincing a woman to stay in a relationship or to deny a potential mate poacher, were likely to achieve greater reproductive success. In sum, younger women are greater assets to men than older women, given younger women's greater fertility and reproductive value; thus, sexual infidelity, abandonment, and lost sexual opportunities are distressing events for men, resulting in men's

use of aggression – especially directed against younger women.

## Intimate Partner Violence and Homicide

The age of a woman predicts the likelihood she will be the target of intimate partner violence or homicide. Young women aged 16–24 years report the highest levels of nonlethal intimate partner violence (Rennison and Welchans 2000). Intimate partner violence may take multiple forms, including physical violence and emotional or psychological aggression (e.g., threats of physical violence or defection). Buss and Duntley (2011) suggest that intimate partner violence may reflect a mate retention strategy in which men attempt to deny a partner's relationship defection or infidelity. Intimate partner violence functions to control a woman's sexuality and to thwart rival sexual access. Male sexual jealousy is the most common cause of intimate partner violence and homicide (Daly and Wilson 1988). To combat the threat of cuckoldry, male sexual jealousy may have evolved as a mechanism of infidelity prevention or detection and as a motivator of subsequent, sometimes violent, behavior (Buss 2000). Given men's evolved interest in securing young, fertile women with high reproductive value as mates, male sexual jealousy should be especially sensitive in the context of mateship to younger women. Because younger women are more desirable to male rivals, male sexual jealousy may motivate men to use aggression against their partner to stop them from defecting. In sum, men may benefit by restricting a younger mate's, as compared to an older, nonfertile mate's, sexuality through physical aggression because this aggression ancestrally increased male reproductive success by lowering the risk of cuckoldry and abandonment.

Intimate partner violence occasionally escalates to homicide, particularly targeting young women. Young women are more likely to be killed by their partner than are older women (Shackelford et al. 2000). Specifically, women aged 15–24 years, within the peak reproductive years, are most likely to be killed by their partner (Daly and Wilson 1988). The greatest risk of

uxoricide (wife-killing by husband) in Canada fell on the youngest registered wives (Wilson et al. 1993). These women were also in the 15–24-year age range, aligning with an evolutionary perspective on men's use of strategic aggression against younger women. Another study found that the risk of uxoricide decreases with a woman's age (Shackelford 2001). Men's partner-killing may be produced by an evolved psychology designed to produce death in these circumstances (Buss 2006). Specifically, ancestral men may have increased their relative reproductive success by permanently dissuading their partner from defecting or committing sexual infidelity – and thereby eliminating entirely any risk of cuckoldry or defection. Researchers have investigated whether younger women are killed more often than older women because younger women are mated to younger men, who commit the majority of violent crimes. The results of this research found that younger women are more likely to be killed across *all* male partner age groups (Shackelford et al. 2000). Because young, fertile women have the highest reproductive value, it follows that men should primarily commit physical aggression against younger mates, which research supports.

## Stalking

Buss (2006) proposed that stalking is a feature of men's reproductive strategy. Stalking is an extreme form of mate guarding and refers to a range of persistent psychological and physically abusive activities, often in the form of spying, surveillance, or threats (Buss 2000). Stalking may function as a mate retention strategy to deter rivals/mate poachers, to acquire new mates or ex-mates, or as a sexual predation or exploitation tactic (Duntley and Buss 2012). Duntley and Buss (2012) suggest that psychological adaptations may facilitate and motivate stalking. The psychology of stalking may have evolved because it increases the likelihood of mate reconciliation and dissuades rivals, which thereby increased the ancestral stalker's reproductive success.

Similar to intimate partner violence and homicide, women within the peak reproductive-age bracket are most likely to be the victims of stalking. A majority (56%) of college-aged (18–24 years) women report having been stalked (Buss 2000). Additionally, Buss (2000) reported that 80% of women who have been stalked in their lifetime indicated that they were younger than 40 years at the time of the stalking. Most of those women were between 18 and 29 years, with an average age of 28 years. Given that fertility peaks in the mid-20s (Thornhill and Palmer 2000), most stalking victims were within the peak reproductive period, suggesting that stalking may be produced by an evolved psychology. Most women report that the men who stalked them did so to keep them from leaving the relationship (Buss 2000). Women's perceptions of stalking align with an evolutionary explanation of stalking. Stalking also sometimes functions as a tactic to sexually coerce women. When successful, it may deter rivals from gaining sexual access, thereby interfering with female sexual choice. Some (but not all) women who are stalked eventually date the man who stalked them (Duntley and Buss 2012). Because young women are the primary targets of stalking, the men who successfully stalk them and gain sexual opportunities, while fending off rivals, may have been ancestrally more reproductively successful.

## Rape

If rape is produced by an adaptation that increased ancestral male reproductive success, one might expect that rapists would target fertile, reproductive-age women, as opposed to older, nonfertile women. Similar to men's physical aggression and stalking behaviors against women, rapists target youthful, reproductive-age women (Thornhill and Thornhill 1983). It is possible that a victim-preference mechanism, such as a desire to copulate with younger, more attractive women, may have increased the ancestral reproductive benefits of rape. Ancestral men who successfully raped reproductive-age women may have thereby increased their reproductive success,

without providing resources or investment to the woman and subsequent offspring, thereby circumventing female sexual choice. In an analysis of over 34,000 robberies, the highest risk of being sexually assaulted or raped during a robbery fell on women aged 15–29 years (Felson and Cundiff 2012). Male perpetrators of *all* age groups that committed sexually aggressive acts during robbery targeted women in this reproductive-age bracket. However, there was no difference between instances of rape and of sexual assault during robbery. The adaptation hypothesis suggests that rape is a reproductive strategy with which ancestral rapists increased their reproductive success by circumventing female sexual choice (Thornhill and Palmer 2000); sexual assault alone would not have increased ancestral reproductive success. Thus, the adaptation hypothesis of rape is not fully supported; however, those who exclusively committed sexual assault primarily targeted younger women, so sexual aggression as an adaptation cannot be dismissed. Additionally, women may have evolved mechanisms to prevent being raped (Buss 2006). Given the costs of rape (e.g., caring for a child without paternal investment), young women are especially fearful of situations that put them in sexual or physical danger (Scott 2003). Scott (2003) reported that as a woman's age increases, her fear of being a victim of various forms of victimization, including sexual aggression, decreases. Research indicating that younger women rate dangerous sexual situations as more distressing than older women provides evidence for evolved anti-rape mechanisms in women. Anti-rape mechanisms may have coevolved in response to evolved sexual aggression mechanisms in men. However, the tendency for men to rape younger women, as compared to older women, does not convey whether men have specialized rape adaptations or if rape occurs as a by-product of other evolved mechanisms (e.g., attraction to youthfulness).

In uniquely violent cases, young women (20–24 years) are the special targets of rape-homicide (Shackelford 2002a). Although it has been hypothesized that younger women may be special targets of men's aggression because they

are more frequently associated socially with younger men, who commit most violent crimes, including homicide, rape, and rape-homicide (Daly and Wilson 1988; Thornhill and Palmer 2000), Shackelford (2002a) provides evidence to the contrary. Young women were *not* overrepresented in cases of theft-murder, only in rape-homicide cases, suggesting that association with younger, violent males is not the cause of younger women's greater risk of rape-homicide. Instead, women's age is the primary predictor of men's perpetuation of rape-homicide. Shackelford (2002b) also found that younger women are more likely to be the victims of rape-homicide involving two or more male offenders, further indicating that rape-homicide is not an outcome of young women being more frequently socially associated with younger men. However, most men who rape do not subsequently kill the victim, perhaps because rape may have increased ancestral reproductive success only when the victim lives to produce a child (Buss 2006). Shackelford (2002a, b) suggests that men who commit rape-homicide kill because the costs of detection may outweigh the benefits of reproduction or because the perpetrators have especially low impulse control or other psychopathic characteristics.

## Conclusion

Younger women, as compared to older women, tend to be the target of men's aggression. Younger women are the primary victims of men's aggression because fertile, reproductive-age women ancestrally afforded men the greatest reproductive success and social status. If controlling a younger woman's sexuality, as compared to an older, non-fertile woman's sexuality, conferred reproductive benefits on ancestral men, mechanisms may have been selected that motivate male sexual proprietariness. Intimate partner violence and homicide are male tactics used to inhibit young women from committing sexual infidelity or deserting the relationship. Stalking may be used by men as a fear-inducing mate retention strategy, particularly targeting younger, reproductive-age women. Men may rape younger women to increase their own

reproductive success without investment, thereby denying the woman sexual choice and freedom. In sum, men of all ages may increase their own reproductive success by using physical and sexual aggression primarily against young, fertile women.

## Cross-References

- ▶ [Benefits of Aggression](#)
- ▶ [Conflict Between the Sexes](#)
- ▶ [Contexts for Men's Aggression Against Women](#)
- ▶ [Evolutionary Standards of Female Attractiveness](#)
- ▶ [Homicide Adaptation Theory](#)
- ▶ [Male Sexual Jealousy to Deter Partner Infidelity](#)
- ▶ [Partner Abuse and Homicide](#)
- ▶ [Sexual Coercion and Violence](#)

## References

- Buss, D. M. (1989). Sex differences in human mate preferences: Evolutionary hypotheses tested in 37 cultures. *Behavioral and Brain Sciences*, *12*, 1–14.
- Buss, D. M. (2000). *The dangerous passion*. New York: Free Press.
- Buss, D. M. (2006). *The murderer next door*. New York: Penguin.
- Buss, D. M., & Duntley, J. D. (2011). The evolution of intimate partner violence. *Aggression and Violent Behavior*, *16*, 411–419.
- Daly, M., & Wilson, M. (1988). *Homicide*. New York: Aldine De Gruyter.
- Dunn, M. J. (2018). Younger escorts advertise higher charges online than older escorts for sexual services cross-culturally. *Evolutionary Psychological Science*, *4*, 1–9.
- Duntley, J. D., & Buss, D. M. (2012). The evolution of stalking. *Sex Roles*, *66*, 311–327.
- Felson, R. B., & Cundiff, P. R. (2012). Age and sexual assault during robberies. *Evolution and Human Behavior*, *33*, 10–16.
- Kenrick, D. T., & Keefe, R. C. (1992). Age preferences in mates reflect sex differences in human reproductive strategies. *Behavioral and Brain Sciences*, *15*, 75–91.
- Rennison, C. M., & Welchans, S. (2000). *Intimate partner violence*. Bureau of Justice Statistics Special Report (NCJ 178247). U.S. Department of Justice, Office of Justice Programs.
- Scott, H. (2003). Stranger danger: Explaining women's fear of crime. *Western Criminology Review*, *4*, 203–214.
- Shackelford, T. K. (2001). Cohabitation, marriage, and murder: Woman-killing by male romantic partners. *Aggressive Behavior*, *27*, 284–291.
- Shackelford, T. K. (2002a). Are young women the special targets of rape-murder? *Aggressive Behavior*, *28*, 224–232.
- Shackelford, T. K. (2002b). Risk of multiple-offender rape-murder varies with female age. *Journal of Criminal Justice*, *30*, 135–141.
- Shackelford, T. K., Buss, D. M., & Peters, J. (2000). Wife killing: Risk to women as a function of age. *Violence and Victims*, *15*, 273–282.
- Smuts, B. (1992). Male aggression against women. *Human Nature*, *3*, 1–44.
- Thornhill, R., & Palmer, C. (2000). *A natural history of rape*. Cambridge, MA: MIT.
- Thornhill, R., & Thornhill, N. W. (1983). Human rape: An evolutionary analysis. *Ethology and Sociobiology*, *4*, 137–173.
- Wilson, M., Daly, M., & Wright, C. (1993). Uxoricide in Canada – Demographic risk patterns. *Canadian Journal of Criminology-Revue Canadienne De Criminologie*, *35*, 263–291.