Women Find Status Attractive; Powerful Men Take Advantage

BY JOHN M. TOWNSEND

Bill Clinton has now admitted that he had an inappropriate relationship with Monica Lewinsky.

For some of us, this came as no shock. Clinton's behavior may be reprehensible, but it is not surprising. Women are attracted to men with high status.

The man may be a champion athlete, stockbroker, hunter or jet pilot, but wherever men are competing, women find them.

These tendencies — for women to be attracted to male status and for men to exploit this attraction — seem to be universal. They have been found in every society for which data are available.

Many pundits predicted that when women gained economic independence, they would no longer have to tie their sexuality to love and financial security, and the traditional gender differences in sex and partner selection would disappear.

No doubt about it: The new freedoms conferred by more convenient and effective contraceptives, legalized abortion and women's increasing economic independence have changed sexual behavior.

But these changes have not eliminated the differences in how men and women express their sexuality or the criteria they use to pick partners.

Differences more visible

On the contrary, the available evidence suggests that the opposite is true: Increasing the freedom of women and men to explore their own sexualities and to choose what they like best makes basic sex differences more, rather than less, visible.

These conclusions are based on 16 years of research I've conducted, involving 2,000 surveys, seven psychological experiments and in-depth interviews with more than 200 people — including 30 athletes, 40 medical students, 50 Latinos and numerous male and female adult professionals.

Women and men perceive sexual attractiveness differently. The criteria they use to judge are weighted differently and the goals underlying the weighting differ, so that the entire process of evaluation is different.

In one experiment, for example, I had models dressed as successful professionals, fast-food employees and working-class townies (who wore silk shirts and gold medallions).

Transforming costumes

High-status costumes literally transformed homely men and made them more attractive to women than handsome men in low-status costumes. Higher-status costumes and descriptions also enhanced women's attractiveness, but they did not make a plain woman desirable to men.

I then had the models wear costumes fitting descriptions of high, medium and low income and occupational status — physician, high school teacher and waiter/waitress.
— and showed them to 160 law students. The results were striking.

Responding to the best-looking model in the fast-food costume, 60 percent of the men said they would be willing to date her, and half were willing to have sex. Only 28 percent of the women said they were willing to date, and 8 percent were willing to have sex.

No woman said she was willing to marry such a person, but 11 percent of the men said that they would.

**Looks didn’t matter**

Most female law students were unwilling to engage in any kind of relationship when models wore the fast-food uniform and were described as waiters — even when the models were good-looking.

Responding to the homeliest model wearing the blazer and Rolex and described as a doctor, a full 40 percent of the women said that they would be willing to marry such a person, and 64 percent were willing to date him. No man said he was willing to marry such a person, and only 33 percent were willing to date her.

In-depth interviews with adult professionals corroborated these findings.

These tendencies are real and they operate in everyday life.

Women are turned off by domineering men, but they are attracted to men who appear successful and confident. The higher women move up the success ladder, the higher their socioeconomic standards for partners are.

Because men are largely indifferent to women’s status and earning power, women with higher status must compete with other women for the relatively small pool of higher-status men. This competition can be heated and intense.

Older, higher-status women deprecate their lower-status competitors (who are often younger and more attractive to men) by calling them bimbos, airheads and ding-a-lings. But the younger women are able to use their youth, beauty and sexuality to capture the attention of prominent men.

Women’s attraction to male status and men’s desire for casual sex give rise to the groupie phenomenon. Men with high status tend to have lots of sex partners because many women find them attractive.

Many of the prominent males I interviewed were acutely aware of the dangers of casual sex with multiple partners — dangers to health, career, marriage and reputation — and they were also aware that women who came on to them usually wanted a lot more than they let on.

**Sex too tempting**

But as these men explained, sometimes the prospect of casual sex with an eager, attractive woman was just too tempting to resist.

When women have casual sex, their motivations are usually quite different from men’s. Even very sexually liberal women have a hard time controlling their negative emotional reactions to casual sex.

Women who have casual sex with high-status men like athletes, politicians or musicians are no exception.

For men, it’s a different story. The more available casual sex is, the more they do it, and the less they think about love and commitment.

It is ironic that convenient, effective contraceptives and women’s economic independence made women’s liberation possible, but they also increased the availability of sex outside of marriage.

Given women’s attraction to male status, high-status men are more able than ever before to satisfy their desire for casual relations with a variety of partners.

Considering all of this, Bill Clinton’s behavior is understandable, if not acceptable. If he has violated legal or ethical codes, then he should be duly sanctioned. But no one should be surprised by his behavior.