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Heterosexual Sexual Behavior Is Governed by Social Exchange and Basic Economic Principles: Sexual Economics Theory

Kathleen D. Vohs* & Jannine Lasaleta**

Human sexual relationships are among adults' most intimate attachments. The intensity and longevity of these relationships make them significant contributors to psychological and physical functioning. One would therefore expect that sexual relationships would be prime examples of communal sharing and ultimate trust. Nonetheless, the majority of social interactions operate under a social exchange principle;¹ each partner tacitly (or not) tracks each partner's contributions and withdrawals within the relationship. Is it possible that sexual relations also operate under principles of exchange? It is and they do.

We work from a model, or theory, of sexual relations, Sexual Economics Theory (SET),² that draws upon social exchange principles to predict when men and women will enter into sexual relations. The model not only calls upon social exchange principles, but sociobiological, evolutionary psycho-social, and neoclassical economic theories as well.³ In this article we will make a case for the

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¹ . Roy F. Baumeister et al., *Social Exclusion Impairs Self-Regulation*, 88 J. PERS. & SOCIAL PSYCHOL. 589, 590 (2005).

² . Roy F. Baumeister & Kathleen D. Vohs, *Sexual Economics: Sex as Female Resource for Exchange in Heterosexual Interactions*, 8 PERSONALITY & SOC. PSYCHOL. REV. 339, 339 (2004).

³ . Of course parallel streams of research address the same concept. For example, see Owen D. Jones, *Sex, Culture, and the Biology of Rape: Toward Explanation and Prevention*, 87 CAL. L. REV. 827 *passim* (1999); Owen D. Jones & Timothy H. Goldsmith, *Law and Behavioral*

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resources—because he or she is more willing to walk away. Thus, to the extent that the most interested partner wants the relationship to continue, he or she gives as many resources to the other as is necessary.

Within the context of heterosexual romantic couplings, the coin of the realm is sex. Sexual Economics Theory emphasizes sex as the resource that women have and men want. Men trade resources that women value—attention, affection, time, money, status, or respect—in the hopes of receiving sex.⁸

What supports this view? First, there is considerable, and perhaps even overwhelming, anecdotal support.⁹ Second, scholarship has demonstrated both that there are robust gender differences in desire for sex,¹⁰ and that cultures and societies imbue female sexuality with value, whereas male sexuality has no such value.¹¹

An extensive literature review examined gender differences in sex drive across twelve domains and found that across each domain men exhibited stronger sex drive than women.¹² Compared to women, men think about sex more, that is, they think about sex more frequently, have more sexual fantasies, are more often aroused, have more sexual urges, want to have sex more, masturbate more often, and report being more interested in sex. Men also desire to have sex with numerous people more than women do, in that men desire more sexual partners, find a greater number of sexual partners more appealing, and are less successful at celibacy. Accordingly, men are also less willing to forgo sex and are less likely to have a serious or pathological lack of sexual desire. Not

⁸ . See Baumeister & Vohs, *supra* note 2, at 340.

⁹ . See Roy F. Baumeister et al., *Is There a Gender Difference in Strength of Sex Drive? Theoretical Views, Conceptual Distinctions, and a Review of Relevant Evidence*, 5 *PERSONALITY & SOC. PSYCHOL.* 242, 263 (2001) (“By all measures, men have a stronger sex drive than women.”); see also POSNER, *supra* note 5.

¹⁰ . See Baumeister et al., *supra* note 9, at 242; see also Jones & Goldsmith, *supra* note 3, at 430, 457 (articulating the biological differences in sexual behavior between genders); POSNER, *supra* note 5, at 91 (discussing the relatively lower sex drive of women).

¹¹ . See Baumeister & Vohs, *supra* note 2, at 340 (“[C]ultural systems will tend to endow female sexuality with value, whereas male sexuality is treated by society as relatively worthless.”).

¹² . See Baumeister et al., *supra* note 9, at 244-62.

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contribution—rather, male virginity is sometimes considered a stigma that needs ridding. Thus, virginity is an indicator that women's, but not men's, sexuality is a valuable resource.

According to the central idea of sex as a resource, women can be thought of as the sexual gatekeeper in their relationships, insofar as women have more power than men in sexual exchanges (due to their lower sex drive).¹⁷ Consequently, women control whether and when sexual relations will take place. One study highlights this point quite well: women and men were asked to report when the first sexual encounter should take place in a dating relationship—for example, the second date, the fifth date, the tenth date.¹⁸ Next, they were asked about their sexual relationships and when sex commenced in those relationships. Third, the researchers assessed the correlation between preferences for the timing of sex and the actual occurrence of sex for men and women separately. For men, the correlation between preferences and actual first sexual commencement failed to correspond ($r = .19$). For women, however, the correlation between preferences and actual first sexual commencement was impressively high ($r = .88$).¹⁹ Women are better predictors of when sexual activities begin, thus suggesting that women truly are the ones who grant access to sex in a relationship, by regulating if and when exchange for their sexual resource takes place.

B. LOCAL SEXUAL MARKETPLACE

Although the sexual decisions of couples are private, broader social factors influence their decisions.²⁰ In the

¹⁷ . See Baumeister et al., *supra* note 9, at 242–43 (“By all measures, men have a stronger sex drive than women.”).

¹⁸ . See Laurie L. Cohen & R. Lance Shotland, *Timing of First Sexual Intercourse in a Relationship: Expectations, Experiences, and Perceptions of Others*, 33 J. SEX RES. 291, 293 (1996) (explaining these experimental methods).

¹⁹ . See *id.* at 295 (“However, when we examined the correlations between behavior and expectations for this subsample, we found that this relationship was strong and highly significant for women ($r = .88$, $p < .01$), but not significant for men ($r = .19$, ns).”).

²⁰ . This framework has its echoes in evolutionary psychological, sociobiological and economic literatures. See generally, POSNER, *supra* note 5; SYMONS, *supra* note 14.

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reflected through changes in sexual activity patterns. For example, when the number of eligible women exceeds the number of eligible men, we can say that the number of sellers exceeds the number of buyers.²⁷ Thus, the price will likely decrease and men will be able to attain sex for a lower price and will contribute fewer resources for sex. One can see this pattern in some contemporary urban Black centers in the United States, where a significant proportion of adult men are incarcerated and hence the ratio of sexually active women to men is high.²⁸ In these cases women (as sellers) compete for the limited supply of men (buyers) and because of competition engage in sexual behavior without demanding as many resources than would be the norm if the supply-demand equation was balanced. Conversely, when the selection of eligible women is limited, the price for sex increases. Men (like bidders in an auction) offer higher prices for the exchange to the extent that there is competition for a woman.

Several factors relate to women's individual abilities to boost the price of sex. A woman may stimulate demand through physical appearance and sex appeal. Flirting and attractive clothing can be seen as a way for a woman to advertise herself.²⁹ When demand is high, competition among women can result in women becoming focused on beauty and promoting the idea of a sexually exclusive past. Women pursue other forms of competition as well, such as derogating other women by suggesting that they are low quality partners due to unattractiveness or promiscuity.³⁰

The above tenets of SET hold explanatory power in

being "duped" into overpaying for goods or services).

²⁷ . See Baumeister & Vohs, *supra* note 2, at 343 ("More precisely, men will give women more resources for sex when men outnumber women than when women outnumber men."); *cf.*, e.g., POSNER, *supra* note 5, at 146-180.

²⁸ . See Erik Eckholm, *Plight Deepens for Black Men, Studies Warn*, N.Y. TIMES, Mar. 20, 2006, at A1.

²⁹ . See Baumeister & Vohs, *supra* note 2, at 344 ("Flirting, wearing sexy clothes, and in general creating the impression that sex with her would be especially pleasant and satisfying, would be economically sensible strategies for a woman to pursue.").

³⁰ . See *id.* at 345 ("Hence women who wish to derogate other women would portray them as either unattractive or as having had many lovers.").

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exchange, rape is a different sort of sexual exchange in which sex is taken from one person against the person's will. In this light, men forcing sex upon women is taking (without permission or exchange) something of value and hence akin to theft.³⁴ A gender asymmetry exists for rape and coercion, in that men are more likely than women to use coercion to obtain sex.³⁵ This may stem directly from gender differences in sex drive, insofar as men desire sex more than do women.³⁶ Above and beyond that effect is the asymmetric treatment of rape. Cultures and their legal systems consider it a far greater crime for a man to rape a woman than a woman to rape a man, suggesting that taking sex from a woman without a fair exchange is a greater loss than is the reverse.³⁷

REVIEW OF EMPIRICAL EVIDENCE II: RELATIONSHIPS AND MATE SELECTION

A. COURTSHIP

During courtship a man tries to initiate sexual responses from a woman by offering her enticing resources. For example, a man may take a woman out to a fancy dinner, buy her nice things, promise wealth and happiness, and show her respect in return for sex.³⁸ In

³⁴ . Posner also discusses rape as a form of theft, see POSNER, *supra* note 5, at 182-183, 384-386. For a view of rape from a sociobiological standpoint, see Jones, *supra* note 3.

³⁵ . See Baumeister & Vohs, *supra* note 2, at 351 ("As with prostitution, there is a well known asymmetry between men and women with regard to sexual coercion: Men are more likely to use force to obtain sex.").

³⁶ . See Baumeister et al., *supra* note 9, at 242 (discussing the stronger sexual desire of males).

³⁷ . See Baumeister & Vohs, *supra* note 2, at 355 ("Although some may deplore the inequality in legal attitudes toward the two genders, we think that this set of laws simply shows that the legal system too has recognized that sex is a female resource. The culture sees the need to protect girls from having their valuable resource infringed on, whereas the sexuality of boys does not have exchange value in the culture and therefore does not require legal protection.").

³⁸ . See *id.* at 343 ("To commence a sexual relationship with a particular woman, a man may have to offer her a fancy dinner, or a long series of compliments, or a month of respectful attention, or a lifelong promise to share all his wealth and earnings with her exclusively. The price is negotiated between two individuals in the context of the prices

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B. MATE SHORTAGES

The ratio between men and women also influences the supply and demand for sex. Guttentag and Secord found that sexual norms change as the ratio between men and women change.⁴⁴ Specifically, shortages of women increase the price of sex, while an oversupply of women decreases the price of sex. One analysis of women's clothing reported that from the years 1885 to 1976 skirt length was shorter in decades in which there were fewer men and higher divorce rates (indicating competition between women).⁴⁵ This finding is in line with Sexual Economics Theory: when demand is low women compete for men (sellers compete for buyers) by aggressively advertising themselves through more revealing clothing.

C. UNEQUAL STATUS

According to Sexual Economic Theory, only females can charge a price from heterosexual men for sexual access. Thus, if a man and a woman were equal in all other respects (e.g. intelligence, status, attractiveness, wealth), engaging in sexual activities would render the relationship unequal since she is giving him something of value. This potential inequality may help explain a pattern labeled the "marriage gradient,"⁴⁶ which describes the fact that in heterosexual couplings, the man usually has higher income, status, age, and education than does the woman. The reverse (the woman having more education, status, money, etc) is rarely observed.⁴⁷

One example of this effect can be seen in groupies, who are noncelebrities who interact, and may have sexual relationships, with celebrities.⁴⁸ Notably, these

⁴⁴ . MARCIA GUTTENTAG & PAUL SECORD, TOO MANY WOMEN? THE SEX RATIO QUESTION 24-33 (1983).

⁴⁵ . See Nigel Barber, *Women's Dress Fashions as a Function of Reproductive Strategy*, 40 *SEX ROLES*, 459, 466 (1999) ("Skirt lengths increased with the population sex ratio, $r(48) = .64, p < .01$, and were inversely related to divorce rate, $r(48) = -.50, p < .01$, and with the proportion of B.A. degrees awarded to women, $r(48) = -.39, p < .01$.").

⁴⁶ . See, e.g., JESSIE BERNARD, *THE FUTURE OF MARRIAGE* 33 (1982).

⁴⁷ . This may be changing. See POSNER, *supra* note 5.

⁴⁸ . While there is anecdotal support for the existence of female groupies, there is very little empirical work exploring the phenomenon. See generally PAMELA DES BARRES, *I'M WITH THE BAND: CONFESSIONS OF A GROUPIE*

interactions appear to be limited to instances in which the groupie is female and the celebrity is male. Within the SET framework these interactions (and lack of them among male groupies and celebrities of either gender), make sense: although both males and females may fantasize about meeting and interacting with celebrities, female groupies are likely to gain the opportunity to do so by offering sex in exchange for the attention of the celebrity. Sexuality is a resource that male groupies do not have to offer.

D. INFIDELITY AND DIVORCE.

Support for sexual economic theory is also evidenced in established relationships. For example, SET is reflected in asymmetric attitudes towards marital infidelity for women and men. In terms of SET, an unfaithful wife is giving away a precious resource whereas extramarital sexual activity on the part of the man does not have the same gravity since his sexuality is culturally not valued.⁴⁹ Therefore, female infidelity is more threatening to the intact couple than is male infidelity, since something valuable has been lost when she has an extradyadic coupling but not when he does. One analysis found support for the tenets of SET in the repercussions of infidelity. Betzig found that in fifty-four of fifty-six cultures in which only one gender's infidelity was grounds for divorce, it was female infidelity. Conversely, male infidelity alone was hardly ever a cause for legal marital separation (only two of fifty-six cases).⁵⁰ Thus, a woman giving sex to a male interloper is seen as more problematic by cultures than is a man giving sex to a female interloper, suggesting cultures value female sexuality more.

A higher exchange value for female than male sexuality is even observed in cultures where there is a formal arrangement for extramarital sex by women. Men from some Eskimo groups offer sex with their wives to

passim (1987) (discussing the author's life as a "groupie").

⁴⁹ . See Baumeister & Vohs, *supra* note 2, at 340.

⁵⁰ . See Laura Betzig, *Causes of Conjugal Dissolution: A Cross-Cultural Study*, 30 *CURRENT ANTHROPOLOGY* 654, 660 (1989) (indicating the causes of conjugal dissolution by sex in Table 3).

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male guests staying at their home.⁵¹ It is seen as an insult to the man if the guest refuses to couple with her, suggesting that the wife is not of high quality.

REVIEW OF EMPIRICAL EVIDENCE III: SEXUAL REVOLUTION

A. SEXUAL REVOLUTION

In the later part of the 20th century, one can understand the change in sexual attitudes and behaviors as a "market correction" in the price of sex. The Sexual Revolution changed attitudes towards sex for both men and women, but more so for women. The Sexual Revolution coincided with advances in birth control as well as women's socioeconomic status. Women possessed and now exercised many of the same rights (e.g., voting) and economic options (e.g., owning property, providing their own income) as men possessed. Thus, the old paradigm where women had to trade sex for resources was no longer supported.

EMPIRICAL RESEARCH USING SEXUAL ECONOMICS FRAMEWORK

In the first empirical investigation specifically using the sexual economic theory framework, Dahl, Sengupta, and Vohs examined gender differences in attitudes toward sexually themed advertising.⁵² According to Sexual Economic Theory, women object to using sex in advertising because it denigrates the uniqueness of sex and hence hampers women from gaining a high price for sex. Sexual Economic Theory also predicts that men will prefer the sexually explicit ads to the extent that they connote sex as common and easily obtainable. Across several experiments, Dahl et al. found support for these hypotheses. We report on some of the experiments here.

In the initial study, women and men were shown either a highly sexual advertisement for a woman's watch,

⁵¹ . See Charles P. Flynn, *Sexuality and Insult Behavior*, 12 J. SEX RES. 1, 6-7 (1976).

⁵² . Darren Dahl et al., *When Will Women Tolerate Sex-Based Advertising? A Sexual Economics Perspective*, 35 J. CONSUMER RES. (forthcoming 2008).

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or a control ad of a breathtakingly beautiful mountain scene promoting the same watch. In half of the advertisements, the watch was described as a gift from a man to a woman, whereas in the other half the watch was presented without additional information. The prediction was that women would reject the use of sex to sell under neutral conditions (i.e., when they saw the mountain ad) but when the watch was shown as a gift given to a woman, this implies the notion of sex with resources given to a woman. Men, Dahl et al. reasoned, would feel the opposite: they would like the use of sex to sell under most conditions, but not when it was connected with the giving of resources from a man to a woman.⁵³

The results revealed the predicted pattern. Women's ratings of the sexual ad were unfavorable unless the sexual ad encouraged the connection of sex with gifts to a woman. Men, on the other hand, were favorably disposed to the sexual ad more than the mountain ad, unless the sexual ad indicated a shift of resources from a man to a woman.

This study demonstrated that women view more favorably a sexually explicit ad when the ad promotes the idea of resource exchange from men to women. Men were less positive about the sexy ad when it was paired with the gift framing than when the gift framing was absent, suggesting they do not like to be reminded of costly sex.

A second study further investigated women's attitudes towards sexually explicit advertising. It not only identified conditions that would improve women's attitudes towards sex ads, but also by demonstrated the reverse was possible. Women read one of three different paragraphs, proofreading for mistakes. This task was used to prime⁵⁴ one of three themes. One-third of the women read about a committed relationship between a

⁵³ . See *id.* at 19 ("Pairing the idea of sex with the notion of resource transfer from men to women reduced men's favorability towards the explicitly sexual ad. Although SET dwells primarily on women, the men's results are consistent with the theory's underlying premise of economic exchange, which would predict that men are averse to the idea of giving up valuable resources in order to obtain sex.").

⁵⁴ . A prime is used to subtly remind people of a certain construct, typically so subtly that activation of the construct does not reach conscious awareness.

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man and a woman, in which the man was a loyal and supportive partner. One-third of the women read about an uncommitted relationship, in which the man was both a disloyal and unsupportive partner. The remaining women read about a man and woman who were leaders of a student club, without any romantic details about their relationship provided.⁵⁵ Next, participants were exposed to either a sexual ad or a control ad (of a mountain scene). Dahl et al. reasoned that, in line with Sexual Economics Theory, the women who saw the sexual ad after they had been reminded of a committed relationship would view the ad more favorably than women who saw the sexual ad after being reminded of a man being unfaithful to a woman.⁵⁶ This prediction follows from the notion that women want commitment and emotional support as a fair exchange for sexual access. Because the mountain ad did not involve a sexual scene, it provided the basis for testing whether women would simply dislike or like any ad after being reminded of an unfaithful or faithful romantic partner.

As predicted, women who were primed with the notion of a committed relationship reported more favorable attitudes about the sexually explicit ad, whereas women who were primed with the idea of an uncommitted relationship partner reported more negative attitudes. In addition, the neutral prime and the nonsexual ad demonstrated that the effect was due to the special combination of the resource-exchange primes (i.e., loyal and disloyal) and the sexual ad.⁵⁷

A third experiment tested men's and women's reactions to a sexual ad. In this case the watch being promoted was said to be of high price in the ad that half of the participants saw, whereas the other half saw the ad with the watch selling for a low price. Sexual Economics Theory would predict that women want sex to be paired with high value, rarity, worth, and expensiveness; men,

⁵⁵ . This served as the neutral prime.

⁵⁶ . See Dahl et al., *supra* note 52, at 26 ("In a logical extension of SET, we found that priming female participants with the notion of a committed relationship partner [i.e., a valuable emotional resource] improved their reactions towards an ad that employed a gratuitous sex appeal, as manifested in both ad and brand attitudes.").

⁵⁷ . See *id.* at 24.

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conversely, want sex to be paired with low cost and common goods.⁵⁸ Hence, their reactions to the ad were predicted to differ as a function of whether the watch was selling for \$1250 (the high cost condition) or ten dollars (the low cost condition). The results showed a pronounced gender asymmetry: men's ratings of the ad did not differ with the cost of the watch, but women's ratings did. Women were unfavorable in their attitudes about the sexual ad when it offered the watch at a low price; however, they were relatively favorable toward the sexual ad when it offered the watch at a high price.⁵⁹ In addition, women reported being in a negative mood after seeing the cheap watch sex ad.⁶⁰ Thus, in line with Sexual Economics Theory, women will tolerate sexual ads if the product being promoted is of a high price because sex is being associated with a high value.⁶¹

The research by Dahl et al. thus suggests that using sex in advertising is better received by females when the sexual scene—which can be interpreted as a woman giving a man a valuable resource—is paired with the giving of resources from a man to a woman, to make for a viable exchange from the woman's perspective.⁶² Thus when encountering sexual ads, a woman will like the ad to the extent that the corresponding context is in line with her view on how sex should be perceived.

FUTURE DIRECTIONS FOR SEXUAL ECONOMICS THEORY

Sexual economics theory suggests numerous avenues for additional research. We review three nascent ideas related to the theory.

One area to pursue involves the men's side of Sexual Economics. Some of our work points to men being relatively impervious with respect to contextual factors in

⁵⁸ . See *id.* at 27.

⁵⁹ . See *id.* at 29.

⁶⁰ . See *id.*

⁶¹ . See *id.* at 31.

⁶² . See *id.* at 32 ("In particular, we found that women's attitudes towards an explicitly sexual ad improved when the ad featured the receipt of a gift from a man to a woman [Experiment 1], was viewed after activating ideas of male romantic loyalty and commitment [Experiment 2], and if the ad promoted an expensive product [Experiment 3].").

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their attitudes toward sex, such as when the price of the watch that the sexy ad is promoting goes from \$10 to \$1250—men's reactions to the different watch prices were equivalent. Notably, though, when men were given information that reminded them that sex is sometimes accompanied by exchange of resources, such as when men were shown the watch positioned as a gift, then they changed in their attitudes toward the sexy ad. More research to link men's perceptions of sex as a function of resource-exchange factors would illuminate their side of the equation.

A related note pertains to men's reactions to costless sex. The straightforward prediction from SET would be that when men encounter a situation that allows them to have 'free' (no resource-exchange) sex, they ought to pounce at the opportunity. Yet most likely there will be differences in what circumstances would elicit this pattern. Men who desire a long-term relationship with the woman in question ought to want to give her resources in order to establish an exchange-based partnership, which will later grow into a communal (give-when-can, take-when-needed) partnership. If men want a short-term relationship with the woman in question, in contrast, the thought of cheap or free sex ought to be especially appealing. This line of reasoning would paint a more nuanced picture of men's motives when it comes to long-versus short-term mating.

Last, one night stands (outside the context of prostitution) would be a fruitful area to study, insofar as they represent sex not involving exchange of resources. Exchange-based relationships take time to develop and, although some minor sorts of exchange can occur within the space of one evening, not much in the way of exchange probably takes place. Hence, women's agreement (recall that women are the gatekeepers of sex; hence when they consent is of import) to engage in one night stands ought to be predicted by circumstances that are free(r) from sexual economics principles, such as when women have access to cultural status and material possessions.

Social exchange theory provides a simple framework for understanding human relationships. In every interaction both parties are expected to give and take something of value from the other person. Sexual relationships add a new dimension to this theory. In countries and cultures, female sexuality is highly valued, whereas male sexuality is not. Not coincidentally, men have a much stronger motivation to obtain sex than do women.

Sexual Economics Theory states that in heterosexual relationships, a woman gives sexual access in exchange for resources such as affection, attention, time, commitment, or money from a man. Both historical and current empirical research supports the theory. The Sexual Economics Theory frames a couple's sexual behaviors as two partners coming together to satisfy somewhat disparate needs: the partners' contributions to the sexual act consist of qualitatively different resources and the output (i.e., which needs are being met) also differ. The price of sex⁶³ varies with features of the social environment and the individuals themselves, much the same as market and product factors affect the price for which a product can sell. This supply and demand notion goes a long way to explaining attitudes towards sex as well as sexual behaviors themselves.

In all cases, we view SET as a robust theory capable of stimulating novel findings and leading to important insights into sexual behavior between heterosexual men and women, but we do not consider the model to be capable of explaining all sexual behavior. It is unclear, for instance, how gay sexual relationships fit into the model (given a small difference in sex drive between the partners combined with the similar value (high for women; low for men) placed on each person's sexuality as a function of cultural norms. Hence the lack of differences between the value and scarcity of the sexuality for each person in the couple makes it questionable how well an exchange-based model would hold.

⁶³ . A measure of resources the man must put forth before the women allows sex to commence.

