

Men Are Still Paying for Women on Dates?

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By Alfie Kohn

[NOTE: This is the complete version of an essay that was abridged for publication in the Boston Globe's Sunday Magazine.]

Imagine that a committed feminist woke up last week from a decades-long coma. She looks around and finds that considerable consciousness-raising has taken place while she's been unconscious. There's progress to savor and celebrate: Women are now serving on the Supreme Court, heading governments in a number of countries, working in professions that had been the exclusive domain of men.

But where informal social norms are concerned, what strikes our latter-day Rip van Winkle is how much things *haven't* changed. For example, she's disheartened by the disparity in appearance between women and men who talk about weather, sports, or business news on TV. (Apparently all available female meteorologists happen to look like fashion models.) She's distressed by the double standard regarding sexual experience that still seems common among teenagers and young adults.

And she is flabbergasted to discover that men still expect to pay for women on a date – as well as by the fact that women accept and

actually seem to prefer this arrangement. “Seriously?” she says. “The last thing I remember is that we were starting to move beyond that.”

Indeed, “dating among young adults in the U. S. remains highly gender-typed,” two researchers concluded in 2011 after reviewing 35 years’ worth of evidence in the journal *Sex Roles*. A LearnVest survey in 2013 found that a majority of men, and an even larger majority of women, thought the man should pick up the check on a first date.

And after surveying some 17,000 heterosexual unmarried individuals from ages 18 to 65, Janet Lever of California State University, Los Angeles, and two colleagues reported in 2015 that, even after they’ve been dating for awhile, men typically still pay for most of the couple’s expenses. In fact, about two-fifths of women – with no difference in response by income level, incidentally – say they’re *bothered* if men expect them to help pay.

It seems likely that these self reports actually understate what’s going on. Today, many people would like to think of themselves, and be regarded by others, as having egalitarian sensibilities. Thus, some who prefer having the man pay probably don’t admit that.

So what’s going on here? One answer is that the man is basically shelling out for the promise of sexual favors. Only a minority of respondents in that new survey – though a nontrivial minority – admitted to thinking in those terms, but the very possibility is so offensive that you’d think splitting the bill would have become the default just to ensure that no one could possibly infer the existence of such a quid pro quo.

The other explanation is that we’re witnessing a continued preference for unequal relationships determined by gender, reminiscent of the days when a woman’s primary identity was as a wife – a “lovely” wife, if the observer felt magnanimous – and people thought nothing of declaring that “it’s the man’s job to...” As Lever and her colleagues put it, “Men’s paying...reinforces the gender stereotype of ‘male as provider.’”

Maybe financial considerations once justified having men pay, but

today unmarried women's incomes are very similar to those of unmarried men's. Yet traditional gender roles have persisted. In any case, what matters is whether the two individuals sitting across the table from each other both make a good living. If so, then the man's paying for her makes precisely as much sense as the woman's paying for him. (And the latter option, you'll notice, is virtually never even considered.)

What it comes down to, I think, is what we mean by a "date." If it's an occasion at which two adults decide to have drinks or dinner together so they can check each other out, well, then naturally they'd split the bill. But if a date is construed as part of a process during which the man is the pursuer and the woman is the pursued – such that she does him a favor by agreeing to be caught – then he'd be expected to pay for the privilege. And only if that pursuit model were widely endorsed by both sexes throughout an entire culture would it be *typical* for men to pay for women. In that case, we'd still be trapped in the age of "chivalry." (That word, which evokes the rescue of helpless maidens by knights in the Middle Ages, is employed today with light irony but, remarkably, without the pejorative tone one might expect in the twenty-first century.)

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I, personally, have not been in a coma, but I was off the dating market for a couple of decades. During that time I was vaguely aware that a new generation was reproducing old patterns, a fact that I found perplexing and sad. Now that I'm back in the fray, what I see at closer range offers even more evidence of how far we haven't come.

First, what's going on can't be blamed on Trump supporters. Many highly educated, professionally successful, politically liberal men and women uphold these reactionary norms without apology or apparent ambivalence. "There is something viscerally unappealing about a guy who doesn't pick up the whole check on a first date," one female management consultant told me.

Second, there are nuances here that may not be evident from a distance. For example, the woman may *offer* to pay for her own meal,

but that offer is sometimes disingenuous: Often, she both expects and prefers him to decline. If he takes her at her word, he has failed the test and she thinks less of him.

On the other hand, if her credit card is extended in good faith, that doesn't necessarily mean she regards the idea of being paid for as a distasteful throwback to a less enlightened age. Rather, it may be a way of communicating her lack of interest in him. As a female on-line columnist put it, "If I ever insisted on paying my half at the end of a first date when you offered to treat, it may have been because I never wanted to see you again." Conversely, as a woman explained to me, "If I let you pay for dinner it means you have a semblance of a chance for another date." She will allow me to pursue her again, and that permission comes with a price tag.

Some try to rationalize this sexist arrangement by stipulating that whoever issued the invitation should pay. The trouble is that the man (still) is typically expected to do the asking. In fact, both men and women of all ages also seem to believe that it's his responsibility, not hers, to reach out *after* a first date to indicate continued interest. Whether they're 20-year-old college students, 40-year-old professionals, or 60-year-old veterans of the fight for the Equal Rights Amendment, most women still assume he should make the first move, still think he should pay for dinner (even if she goes through the motions of saying otherwise), still believe it's up to him to call or text later to ask her out again. According to the authors of the *Sex Roles* article, a sample of recent popular dating guides "generally endorsed traditional feminine passivity and masculine agency in the dating context." And that advice is widely accepted.

For heaven's sake, *why*? "Because that's the way our parents and grandparents did it" is obviously not a satisfactory answer. Quite the contrary: To point out that we're still in thrall to inegalitarian beliefs and indefensible behaviors should provoke a flush of embarrassment and a vow to move past them. Shouldn't we be appalled by these scripts once they're brought to our attention?

While I think it bodes ill for our culture that this situation has

persisted, I must confess that I regard it as a useful diagnostic tool. Apart from obvious criteria like intelligence and attractiveness, many of us searching for love, sex, and companionship also keep an eye out for apparently insignificant attributes and preferences that may be correlated with core values and therefore predict compatibility. How does he or she react to a particular book, movie, or song that we cherish – or despise? Does this person listen to NPR? Believe that everything happens for a reason? Tip generously?

How a woman feels about men picking up the check on a date has become just such a marker for me – a way of peering beyond education, income, or political affiliation to uncover deeper values. My hunch is that these values will eventually make their presence felt as a preference for an asymmetrical relationship with rigid gender-based roles and expectations.

Thus, in the personal statement I posted on an online dating site, I mention (toward the end) where I stand on this issue. My goal is partly to avoid awkwardness when the check arrives – and also to make it clear that if I say, “Sure,” when she offers to split the bill, it doesn’t mean I’m not interested in her. Or that I’m cheap.

Mostly, though, I’m using this incidental issue to say something about my values and about the kind of woman I’m looking for. That would be someone who, from our first meeting, wants us to be on equal footing, someone who, if I proposed to pick up the whole check, would give me a funny look – a little confused, a little put off, maybe a little concerned that she had overestimated me – and say, “Why in the world would you pay for me? Is this 1955?”

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