Let's Get Serious: MIT Sloan's Joshua Ackerman Applies an Evolutionary Economic Perspective to How and When Men and Women Express Commitment in Relationships

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Research asks whether women or men are more likely to confess love first, and why?

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The words "I love you" have inspired eons of hope, sacrifice, and tragedy. In modern relationships, the confession is the very essence of romantic devotion, and suggests a desire to shift from short-term fling status to a more serious, long-term relationship.

But viewed through the lens of an evolutionary economic perspective the declaration is not so straightforward, according to Joshua Ackerman, assistant professor of marketing at MIT Sloan School of Management. In a new paper* published in the Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, Ackerman shows how men and women incur very different costs and gain different potential benefits from engaging in long-term commitment, which affects how and when they first express love.

"Saying: 'I love you' is a negotiation process; essentially, you're making an offer," he says.

"And from an evolutionary-economics perspective, the decision to make that offer is different for men than it is for women. In the romantic marketplace, women want to minimize the risk of selling too low, whereas men want to minimize the risk of not bidding high enough. For men, the biggest mistake would be to not communicate commitment and lose the relationship. For women, the biggest mistake would be to impulsively trust her partner's declaration of 'I love you' and gamble on a sexual relationship without the man's investment."

In a series of studies, Ackerman and his colleagues, Vladas Griskevicius at the University of Minnesota and Norman Li at Singapore Management University, show that while people overwhelmingly believe that women are more likely to express love first in relationships, it is men who more often make the first move in confessing love, and feel happier receiving such confessions. Their research also shows that men's and women's reactions to confessions of love differ dramatically depending on whether the couple has had sex.

"There are a lot of popular media that propagate this notion that women say: 'I love you' first, but when you look at real-life examples, it turns out that men tend to say it first. In our studies, men report thinking about saying it an average of six weeks before women do," says Ackerman. "The reason is simple: they are not facing the same kind of evolutionary costs. In fact, they face a higher cost from missing out on a romantic opportunity. Men want sexual access because this is a necessary step to spreading their genes. Women, as the power-holders in sexual relationships, need time to assess the quality of their potential mate."
Romantic relationships are largely dictated by the "parental investment" principle - even when the couple is not necessarily interested in becoming parents right away. This principle states that because women are the ones who bear children and expend considerably more energy rearing them, they will tend to be more romantically choosy than men. "Women face heavier costs and have more to lose in committing to sexual relationships than men do," says Ackerman. "So as smart economic actors, women have a stronger motivation to choose carefully and wisely, whereas men have a relatively stronger motivation to be chosen."

Ackerman and his colleagues also conducted studies to determine how happy people felt when they heard their partner say: "I love you,' and how their reactions differed based on whether the couple had had sex. Because committed, long-term relationships often involve sexual activity, confessions of love may be used to achieve sexual access by - truthfully or deceitfully - implying long-term romantic interest.

"The act of sex is the point at which people incur genetic costs because children might result. To put it in completely blunt and un-romantic terms, it's 'after the sale,'" he explains. "Because of the costs and benefits associated with sex, men are relatively more interested in seeking this access at the outset of a given relationship. Much of this is unconscious of course. People aren't necessarily thinking about costs and benefits, deceiving through confessions of love, or their genes, but they still are affected by these concerns."

Ackerman found that if a couple had not yet had sex, men tended to respond more positively to hearing 'I love you' than women. "Men heard this declaration as an implicit signal that sex was going to happen," says Ackerman. "But once the couple has had sex, women tended to respond more positively to hearing 'I love you' than men because they considered the declaration as a symbol of commitment."

Ackerman says that the evolutionary-economic approach not only provides insight into the communication of commitment in the romantic realm, but also has implications for how commitment is conveyed in other types of relationships, including friendships, teams, families, and on the job.

"I don't think people are necessarily doing an internal, strategic cost-benefit analysis before they say 'I love you,' or making some other long-term promise, but our research shows that people do follow an established evolutionary-economic pattern," says Ackerman. "The costs and the benefits that people have long faced over the course of human evolution still affect our most basic decisions today, including when we confess love and how we feel when someone says 'I love you.'"