
Comment on Barbara Risman's review of *Cheap Sex: The Transformation of Men, Marriage, and Monogamy*

MARK REGNERUS

University of Texas at Austin
regnerus@prc.utexas.edu

The habit of contesting criticisms in print is one I have never acquired, in part because I am committed to the democracy and pace of scholarly debate. Nothing attracted me more to the sociological life than the opportunity to wrestle with ideas. But that is why I feel compelled to respond to Risman's apologetic interpretation of *Cheap Sex*. The reader learns next to nothing about what is actually in the book. Her remarks display far less interest in wrestling with ideas than in ad hominem assaults and sarcastic guesses at my character, values, and motives.

Risman calls cheap sex incoherent, thinks exchange theory is a "fallacy," and is convinced I get my ideas and inspiration from my alleged "conservative religious values." None of these are accurate. Cheap sex isn't about nonmarital or nonprocreative sex. It is the ease of accessing desirable sexual experiences, with someone or without. My claim is that the "cost" of such access is notably lower today than it was before the advents of artificial contraception, digital pornography, and online dating apps. The first of these technologies lowers barriers to coupled sex, the second introduces additional supply of sexual experiences (and hence competition), and the third makes the search for partners more efficient. What we are seeing happen is exactly what Anthony Giddens predicted in *The Transformation of Intimacy*: greater interest in the cultivation of sexuality, an emergent "pure" relationship regime, and a recession in stable commitments. This isn't a moral statement. It's simple logic, deduction, and observation. So why the moral panic? After all, I counseled readers who are "fans of our new relational realities" not to worry, because those realities "are not going anywhere."

What is Risman afraid of, then? I think she, together with many of our peers, is anxious

about the failure of the gender revolution to pay wide, consistent, and enduring dividends in intimate relationships. I make a case for why this failure has occurred, but Risman retorts that my book lacks evidence. "Regnerus provides only four tables," she claims. And my values "distort the analysis and preordain the argument." I count 11 tables, and an additional 11 figures of data and a pair of conceptual models. Perhaps Risman's own value commitments act as blinders, preventing her from seeing what's actually in the book. Indeed, Wade and I discern a variety of similar patterns. We both describe an "unappealing" masculine sexual culture. We talk about the stalled gender revolution. We each recognize that men are not participating widely in the kinds of emotion work that women often exhibit in relationships, and that there appears to be no imminent change in this. But Wade is adulated while Regnerus is excoriated, presumably because Wade is committed to the "feminist response," which is to "finish the gender revolution. . ." *Cheap Sex* and its author, however, are far more into observation than revolution. This is why my book concludes with eight predictions, not eight remedies.

Risman also sees things that are not in the book, including causal claims, criticisms of any sex outside heterosexual marriage, references to women as cattle, men as victims, and assertions that "monogamy is biologically programmed." In the book, I asked and answered, "Is monogamy natural? I have no idea." *Cheap Sex* is, in fact, replete with nuance, context, and uncertainties. It does not overreach. The book is not above criticism, of course, and I concur with Risman that "findings must be based on evidence, or we have philosophy, not social science." Had she offered up more evidence and less

exaggeration, this could have been an interesting review.

Risman is welcome to sculpt her own research toward fostering her goal of “good sex with whomever one fancies in a culture that values emotions as well as orgasms.” I just don’t see how it could work. Elizabeth Armstrong and Paula England identified the importance of women’s relationship security for good sex in their sensible 2012 *American Sociological Review* article, amid numerous first-hand accounts of frustration

with men’s expectations and behavior when romantic commitment is absent. It makes sense. Wide access to desired sexual experiences made possible by sought-after technologies, together with the numeric (and concomitant power) imbalance between men and women searching for different kinds of relationships, should ultimately impede rather than advance her goal. There is no free lunch in exchanges, only trade-offs.

Reply to Regnerus

BARBARA J. RISMAN
 University of Illinois-Chicago
 brisman@uic.edu

In this brief response to the Regnerus “Comment,” I shall ignore the personal insults and critiques of my motivation. Instead, I shall briefly respond to the claims of inaccuracies and reiterate my major themes.

Despite the Regnerus claim, my review clearly analyzes the ways in which Regnerus and Wade focus on the same issue: sex outside of relationships. Their explanations for how this sexual script developed and what to do about it differ.

Nowhere in my review did I suggest that exchange theory was a fallacy. I did suggest that how Regnerus applied exchange theory was fallacious. In exchange theory, one has to accurately identify the sources of dependency and alternative sources to meet needs. Power is the inverse of dependency. As Regnerus suggests, there may indeed be more women than men in the dating pool who desire marriage. But unlike the past, these women have alternative sources for economic survival and sexual gratification, so they do not need men like they used to. And so perhaps they are more picky and do not choose to marry men without stable jobs. Why don’t men have stable jobs anymore? My hypothesis would be the gig economy and the increase of precarity in the labor force. Regnerus argues that men don’t have the motivation to work hard in the labor force

if they don’t have to marry and support wives in order to get access to sex with women. Regnerus ignores all the recent research on class distinction in marriage rates. One could do a test of these alternative hypotheses, but you will not find that in this book. Instead, the presumptive hypothesis that drives the explanation is that “cheap sex,” which includes sex outside of marital relationships, pornography, or any other genital erotic experience beyond marriage, deprives men of the motivation they need to work hard and succeed as breadwinners.

Nowhere do I say Regnerus writes about women as cattle. I do cite another critic, Philip Cohen, who sums up *Cheap Sex* with an analogy that seems apt: men don’t want to marry anymore because why buy the cow when the milk is free. Regnerus does indeed presume that men want sex more than women, and women want love more than men, and such a presumption is at least implicitly rooted in the presumption of biological sex differences. Finally, as for women needing the security of relationships for orgasm, this is once again selective reading of other research. In the Armstrong and England (2012) article Regnerus cites, the authors clearly state that there are several predictors of women’s orgasms and that specific sexual practices and experience with