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Love and Sex in the Marketplace

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In 1963 I graduated with a Ph.D. from Stanford University. My advisor, Leon Festinger, casually opined that he could get me a job anywhere I liked. “Choose” he said. I chose Harvard, Yale, or Bell Labs. (This was the post-Sputnik era, when jobs were so plentiful that it was a seller’s market). Leon was supremely egalitarian, but the academic world was not. After a fistful of rejections—almost all saying that a woman wouldn’t fit in at their premiere university—Leon began to fret. Then (as my aspirations declined), came similar rejections from junior colleges, and finally from all-boys’ prep schools, Leon just gave up on finding me an academic job. Finally, in desperation, he called his long-time friend, Dean E. G. Williamson at the University of Minnesota, who offered me a job at the Student Activities Bureau. It would be my task to arrange activities for incoming freshmen. Happily, and with some luck, I soon found my

way to the Laboratory for Research in Social Relations, which in its short history had housed such luminaries as Leon, Stanley Schachter, Harold Kelley, Gardner Lindsey, Elliot Aronson, Ellen Berscheid (who was then a graduate student), and the like. I was accepted as a sort of an honorary sidekick.

I have always been intrigued by passion (what graduate student is not) but in the early 1960s, passionate love and sexual desire were considered topics too silly, too trivial, too evanescent, and too mysterious to warrant investigation. But as an organizer of U of M's Orientation activities, I was free to investigate anything I wanted. And what I wanted to do was to discover the underpinnings of romantic love and sexual desire—specifically the influence (if any) of market conditions on what young people yearn for, what they expect, and what they eventually settle for in a mate. Thus, in 1963, my friends and I designed the Computer Dance study—one of the first studies to investigate love, sexual desire, and mate selection—and certainly one of the first to match couples up with computers.

The Matching Hypothesis

In fairy tales, Prince Charming often falls in love with the scullery maid. In real life, however, after some experience, people—whether they

are young or old, gay, lesbian, or heterosexual—generally end up settling for “suitable” partners. In the end, we thought, market conditions would prevail. Or so we thought.

To test this notion, we invited incoming freshmen to a get-acquainted dance, (see Hatfield, et al., 1966, for complete details). Couples were promised that a (then) new innovation, a state-of-the-art (dismal) IBM computer would match them with an appropriate blind date. (In truth, the students were randomly matched with one another.) When the freshmen arrived to purchase tickets, a trio of ticket sellers surreptitiously rated their physical attractiveness. From student records we also assembled information on their self-esteem, scholastic aptitude, intelligence, grades, and personality (we possessed their scores on the prestigious *Minnesota Multiphasic Personality Test* and the *California Personality Inventory*).

At the dance, the 400 matched couples chatted, danced, and got to know one another. Then, during the 10:30 p.m. intermission, we swept through the dance hall, rounding up couples from the dance floor, lavatories, and fire escapes—even adjoining buildings. We asked the students to tell us frankly (and in confidence) what they thought of their dates. How much did they like them? How much did

they think their dates liked *them*? Did they plan to ask them out again? If *they* were asked out, would they accept? Six months later we contacted couples again to find out if they had, in fact, dated.

We found that all young men and women yearned for the stars. Everyone—regardless of how low their self-esteem, what *they* looked like, how dismal their intelligence or personality--preferred (in fact, insisted) on being matched in future with the most self-confident, best looking, most charming, brightest, and most socially skilled partners available. During the dance, those whom blind chance had matched with handsome or beautiful dates were eager to pursue the relationships (whether those dates liked or despised them!)

When couples were contacted six months after the dance, participants (whether they were good looking or homely, well-treated or not) had in fact attempted to wangle a date with the best-looking. The more handsome the man and the more beautiful the woman, the more eagerly he or she was pursued. *Interestingly, men and women cared equally about their dates' appearance.* Every effort to find anything else that mattered failed. Men and women with high self-esteem and exceptional IQs and social skills, for example, were not liked any better than those who were less well endowed.

This study demonstrated that (as predicted) young people yearn for perfection—especially in appearance. Alas, there is, indeed, a difference between what people desire (perfection) and what they can get (imperfection). Subsequent research made it clear that, all too soon, young optimists discover they must be more realistic. Aim too high and you discover (after undergoing the humiliation of rejection) that someone is “out of your league.” Settle for too little, and friends counsel that “you can do better.” Eventually, like Goldilocks, you settle for someone who is “not too hot, not too cold, but just right.”

Of course, in the dating and mating marketplace, physical appearance is not the only thing of value. Couples can be well- or ill-matched in a variety of ways. For example, a collection of young beauties all chose Seth Rogen, who—although he is hardly handsome, is charming, intelligent, famous, and very funny. A variety of assets all contribute to one’s “mate value”—a general indicator of how desirable a person is in the dating market.

In conclusion: Research, much of it now emanating from Equity theory (see Hatfield, et al., 2008) seems to indicate that in the *early stages* of dating relationships, considerations of the marketplace prevail. Men and women strive to attract socially attractive partners and are

profoundly concerned with how rewarding, fair, and equitable their budding relationships appear to be. Were we to review recent Equity theory research, we would find that in longer-term relationships, as love and shared interests grow stronger and family ties increase, market considerations generally grow less important . . . but that is a topic for another day.

What changes have occurred in the 50+ years since the original Computer Matching study was run! Instead of research on love and sexual desire being taboo, it is now ubiquitous. Today, a vast army of scholars from a daunting variety of theoretical disciplines—social psychologists, neuroscientists, cultural psychologists, anthropologists, evolutionary psychologists, sociologists, and historians—are all addressing (and answering) the same theoretical questions with which we once struggled. They are also employing an impressive array of new techniques as well. Primatologists are studying animals in the wild. Neuroscientists are pouring over fMRIs. Chemists are examining the chemical bases of love. Historians are now studying demographic data (marriage records, birth, and death records; records of divorce), architecture, medical manuals, church edicts, legal records, song lyrics,

and the occasional private journal that floats to the surface. Love research is now a gargantuan and still growing industry.

In the last half-century, society is finding new ways for people to meet potential romantic partners. From the innocent beginnings of the 1960s Computer Matching study and its peers, new and improved web sites offer more innovative opportunities. Whereas some sites, such as Match.com, e-Harmony, Zoosk, Badoo, and Tinder, are for the general population, other sites target special niches of the population. There are those designed to appeal to various age groups (e.g., HookUp.com and SilverSingles.com), political groups (ConservativeMatch.com and LiberalHearts.com), religious groups (CatholicSingles.com, Jdate.com, ChristianCafe.com, and HappyBuddhist.com), and sexual orientation (GayWired.com and superEva. com). Social media (such as Muslima.com, Muslims4marriage.com, and Meet IsraeliSingles.com) are flourishing even where forbidden—in the Middle East, for example. Dating sites also exist for people who possess mental and physical disabilities, unusual sexual preferences, and so forth. Even people who wish to find dates for themselves and their favorite pets can sign on to a site (DateMyPet.com). Currently, there are more than 8,000 dating websites servicing the world.

What impact this Brave New World will have on the dating and

mating habits of its citizens is a fascinating, unsettled, and unsettling question.

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