

Social Psychology Perspective on Dating and its Relation to Dating Services

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1 Introduction

Dating services will be judged by their success in bringing together compatible relationship partners. Thus a dating service has a responsibility to its customers to effectively facilitate this matching. This I take as the fundamental task of an honest dating service. The question of what the psychology literature on human dating can offer dating service designers is a question of how their research results can be applied to this fundamental task. This approach is particularly critical in the presence of more profit-driven dating websites and a growing suspicion in social literature that purveyors of dating services seek to exploit people's fears and vulnerabilities about dating and romance by offering easy answers and fake scientific "solutions" [BBBS00].

There is a body of work in social psychology about human dating behavior (frequently called human mating behavior). This literature addresses many common beliefs about dating and romance. There have been studies investigating what predicts romance, if it is true that people tend to marry people like themselves, or if it is true that "opposites attract." Other work has investigated the existence of an irrational "love at first sight" phenomenon. Still more work addresses the qualities of a relationship that make it either succeed or fail. While a survey of the full literature on human mating behavior is beyond the scope of this paper, we endeavor to address the broad trends that have implications for the designers of online dating sites.

1.1 Evolutionary theories of mating

A related body of work applies an evolutionary perspective to explain the psychology of human mating behavior. A key element to this theory is that most physical and mental traits, including health, fertility, disease resistance, intelligence, wit, humor, athletic ability, artistic ability, wealth, earning potential, business acumen, kindness, faithfulness, social aptitude, and of course, sexual attractiveness are consciously or unconsciously sought out in mates primarily because 1) these traits are to some extent heritable and 2) they confer an important adaptive advantage (summarized in [MT98]).

This line of research explains that, other things being equal, people prefer relationship partners displaying these classically valued characteristics. Thus, this research lacks practical value for online dating service designers and administrators.

2 Evidence-based models from behavioral psychology

Well-designed studies on dating behaviors have been conducted in the field of social psychology, and offer some insights into preferences displayed in choosing a romantic partner. As a precautionary note, it is unclear how generalizable these findings are to special populations of dating humans. There are a number of online dating sites that target well-defined socio-cultural or gender-preference groups (*e.g.*: Gay.com is a dating site for for homosexual men; JDate.com is a Jewish dating site). Research findings derived from studies conducted on predominantly heterosexual, Anglo-Saxon Protestant populations may not be broadly applicable to more precisely defined populations.

2.1 A paucity of predictors for romance

Surveys demonstrate that serious romantic couples *perceive* themselves as being deeply in love. Such couples self-report that they believe they have found their perfect companion. Are there clearly identifiable markers for predicting who will fall in love? The short answer is no.

Using metrics such as sense of humor, extroversion, desire for intimacy, attitudes about risk, etc. a number of studies have demonstrated that married couples (even happily married couples) frequently do not share many personality traits [SL90, CHO92]. Other studies have investigated the relationship between opinions on certain topics and note that married couples only resemble each other (and then only slightly) on a very few issues, these being general attitude toward religion [WKL⁺90], general social conservatism or liberalism [MEH⁺86], and level of education achieved [LT93]. Common sense would seem to suggest a greater similarity.

A study of fraternal and identical twins [LT93] tested whether there is some unknown genetic predisposition to be attracted to a certain kind of person. Perhaps each person has a specific, natural, genetically-coded type of person to which they will be attracted. And if so, then twins will marry similar people. By administering several very detailed questionnaires to close to a thousand twins, they discovered the following. The two spouses of two twins have almost entirely unrelated personalities. Further, one twin's opinion of his or her twin's spouse is as likely to be approving as a random person's opinion of the spouse. The study did notice that two twins were very similar to each other except for their choice of spouse, exhibiting very similar personalities, activities they enjoy, and wardrobes.

2.2 If romance is inscrutable, what about relationships?

Even though social psychology has demonstrated that personality is not a strong predictor of who a person will choose for a dating or marriage partner, there are some characteristics of successful relationships that are well documented.

Work of a more cognitive psychological perspective has studied how people actually get along in serious romantic relationships. It has been observed that different people have different emotional “closeness” requirements, or different desires to discuss emotional issues with their partners. Some studies show that a mismatch between people who need a high degree of “closeness” and people who don’t leads to unhappy relationships and are precursors to breakups. It has been suggested that this sort of emotional compatibility should play a larger role in a person’s perspectives of who they choose as relationship partners [Hol00].

Some fairly complicated studies have shown that it is important for serious relationship partners to agree on daily activities [SL90]. They found that participating together in activities such as doing chores, grocery shopping, and running errands correlated with stable relationships. However, people rarely consider this when choosing a romantic partner. Instead, people tend to value passion, intimacy, and loyalty in a relationship [FSTG99].

There’s a large body of work that supports a wishful-thinking property of subjective partner judgements. One study shows that fully 85% of men rate their spouse as very attractive or above average attractiveness [Fei92]. Several studies show that people in happy relationships tend to ignore or somehow write-off their partner’s faults or defects. Other studies have shown that happy couples also imagine that their partner understands them and their emotions, even when the partner says they do not understand. See [Hol00] for an overview of this work. The conclusion suggested by this work is that having a positive image or illusion is important to having a happy and stable relationship. This, of course, is totally obvious, if one considers the alternative. A person with a negative image of their partner that emphasizes their faults and foibles would hardly be expected to stay in the relationship, or describe the relationship as happy.

Thus, these studies have brought us to the startling conclusion that people in happy relationships tend to like their partner and get along well with their partner.

3 Will a dating service help?

Given our current understanding of human behavior, it is highly unlikely that a dating service will reliably predict who an individual person will become romantically attached to, or even estimate the likelihood of any two individuals becoming romantically attached. Any service that claims to do this by magic or science is misrepresenting its capabilities, and there’s a growing trend for unscrupulous dating services to make such claims [BBBS00]. However, a dating service can provide introductions, and a dating service can help rule out some matches between people who are quite unlikely to get along. We should stress that other social groupings, such as people who share similar interests in religion, politics, or leisure activities, can also serve to provide introductions between people with basic similarities.

The good news is that people are good at determining if a person is “right for them” or if a relationship with a person is going to last - even if they are unable to articulate what has led to this conclusion. So that first introduction is truly important, since the couple is, in fact, quite able to decide for themselves at that point if a relationship is worth pursuing.

Berg and McQuinn [BM86] found that with 85% accuracy, they were able to predict the status of the relationship four months later based on the couple's (separate) attitudes about the relationship from the beginning. This supports the theory that a decision about compatibility and attraction is made quite early in a relationship, and this perception continues unchanged through at least the first four months of a romantic relationship. If something "feels right" at the beginning, then it probably is right.

The previous example shows that people's perception of how the relationship *is* is usually correct. On the other hand, a person's perception of how a relationship *should be* can also influence the course of the relationship. Some people believe in "love at first sight" while other people believe that serious relationships grow and evolve slowly over time. One study [Kne98] found that early satisfaction with a relationship (such as the study just mentioned by [BM86]) predicted outcomes of the relationship only for couples who believe in love at first sight. Couples that believed relationships grow over time were apparently more willing to withhold judgement.

Thus a person's perspective is important in determining if a relationship will work: if a person realistically thinks it will or wants it to, that's as good a determiner of the relationship's course as there is.

4 Lessons learned

This research suggests some strategies for designing personal ads. Since short and long-term dating strategies actually conflict in many ways, this assumes the goal of dating is to end in a serious, romantic, long-term relationship.

The evolutionists teach us that there are some things people universally find attractive, including humor, good looks, kindness, and earning potential. Demonstrate these in the personal ad. Allow pictures to be posted, or maybe movies or audio clips, as bandwidth becomes cheaper. Suggest topics for writing that demonstrate personality - kindness, wit, humor, opinions, and attitudes can be evident in brief descriptions of places one likes to travel, hobbies one enjoys, or something at the workplace. Encourage an anecdote about doing a chore, going shopping, or something else mundane and universal. Reading the personal ad should approximate a first meeting. This allows people to do what they're best at: judge for themselves if a relationship is likely to succeed.

Dating sites should have multiple-choice questions about the big general topics that are correlated between spouses, including religion, politics, education, and attitudes toward smoking and drinking. Since these are important, it's likely people will want to search on these features, or have the dating service report only people with certain religions or political inclinations. Other broad cultural categories can be alluded to, social conservatism or liberalism is probably evident through indirect means, and does not require its own multiple-choice question. The research surveyed suggests that people should somehow advertise their emotional neediness, but I leave it to future research to determine a socially acceptable and pejorative-free way of doing so.

It seems that the lack of answers in the literature on human dating behavior leads to a lack of answers for the designers of dating services. However, this is a growing field, with several different subdivisions (cognitive, behaviorist, evolutionist), and it is likely

that the understanding will increase rapidly in the next few years. Online personals designers will have to keep abreast of future results.

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