

GOING OUT OR HANGING OUT: COUPLE DATING AND GROUP DATING IN THE NEW MILLENNIUM

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ABSTRACT

A review of the literature on dating patterns suggests that the traditional dating format, based largely on traditional gender roles, has given way to group dating. Recent research suggests that this change may be overestimated. This exploratory article investigates the existence of such changes in dating patterns. Data for this study were collected from a total of 226 undergraduate students at a southeastern university. The data reveal that couple dating and/or group dating are directly related to the degree of involvement between the participants, with the dyad still the norm for individuals who regard their relationship as exclusive.

INTRODUCTION

In the decade of the 1950s dating norms were entrenched such that a man asked a young woman "out" on Wednesday for a Saturday night "date." "Out" always implied that the norms in this social encounter were never in flux. Dating followed a formal and very traditional social process where each person performed his or her role (Bailey 1988). Dating has been described by some social commentators (for example, Waller 1937) as a "courtship game" that has its own set of rules, strategies, and goals. The male makes the first move and the female waits to be "asked out." She must play coy, appear shy, and demonstrate her attraction by employing certain paralinguistic techniques as body language, changing her tone of voice, making furtive glances, or simply appearing vulnerable (Bailey 1988).

During traditional dating the participants follow traditional gender roles. The male makes the plans, creates the evening's itinerary, picks her up at a predetermined time, meets her parents, opens doors, picks up the tab and overall behaves like a gentleman. Although he talks about himself (Tannen 1990) he is very careful not to disclose personal and highly intimate biographical information (Gallmeier, Zusman, Knox, & Gibson 1997). The dating couple may go to a school dance like the prom, attend a rock concert, have dinner, take in a movie or frequent a sporting event. They each dress properly adhering to societal gender role proprieties, especially for more ceremonial and ritualistic social events like the prom (Best 2000).

The symbolism of the male paying is significant for it connotes the female's economic

dependence on the male, which enables him to dominate and control the conversation serving as a form of anticipatory socialization for marriage (Bailey 1988; Tannen 1990). If the male pays, he often expects that he will get something in return, usually in the form of sexual favors. The woman knows this and depending on her age, she may feel obligated to reciprocate by kissing her date good night, "making out," or engaging in sexual intercourse with him (Eder, Evans & Parker 1995; Moffat 1989).

On a traditional, formal date the woman expects to have her escort pay all the expenses and while remaining passive she attempts to please the male without compromising herself in any way. In keeping with the traditional female sexual script she is expected to exhibit less sexual interest than her male counterpoint and to curb the male's amatory advances (Asmussen & Shehan 1992; Bailey 1988; Fine 1988). It is important to note that this traditional pattern represents "ideal norms" and as Coontz has revealed (1992), history suggests dating couples have followed a combination of "ideal norms" with what sociologists call "real norms" while practicing courting rituals. Nevertheless, this traditional dating pattern has continued to be the dominant form throughout much of the 20th century.

Over the last decade and as we move into the 21st century an alternative to the traditional dating pattern has emerged (Gallmeier et al 1997; Knox, Zusman, & Nieves 1997; Eder & Parker 1987; Kessler et al 1985). It is often referred to as "getting together" (Gallmeier et al 1997), or "hanging out," (Eder et al 1995) and is illustrated well by the popular situation comedy, *Friends*.

Table 1 - Differences Between Couple and Group Dating

	Couple Daters	Group Daters	Significance Level
Current age	21.2	19.9	p<.04
First date	14.8	14.0	p<.003
# of date same person	7.95	6.21	p<.032
Sex - male	80%	20%	p<.02
Sex - female	64%	36%	
Engaged	78%	22%	p<.005

During the 1960s and 1970s, changing sexual norms, the increasing availability of contraceptives, a decline in parental authority, and the increasing activism of young people helped reverse the conservative dating trends of the 1940s and 1950s. Dating was transformed into a casual and spontaneous form of courtship. Greatly influenced by the women's movement, women no longer waited to be asked out but instead began to initiate dates and intimate relationships. There was an increasing emphasis on "going Dutch," where each person paid her or his own way. Going Dutch was particularly common among middle-class youth, who were financially more independent than poor and working-class youth (Ramu 1989). Paying one's own way was seen as a way of reducing the exploitation of young women by males, who in the past, expected sexual favors in return for the money spent on dating.

The impact of feminism and the women's movement in promoting more egalitarian gender roles probably are the most important factors responsible for this emerging pattern. Although most Americans continue to find mates through dating of some sort, dating is no longer what it was prior to the mid 1960s (Murstein 1980). Not only have the structure and content of dating changed, but so has the terminology. The term dating has been replaced with such terms as "going with," "hanging out," or "getting together." Some observers have even suggested that not only has the language changed but dating itself is obsolete. They argue that dating has been replaced by informal pairing off in larger groups, often without the prearrangement of asking someone out (Whyte 1995 61).

"Hanging out" or "getting together" are centered on cooperation and sharing. Equality is an important value, and to symbolize equality, participants "go Dutch," each paying his or her own way. Since each person pays their way the feelings of obligation or

dependence that are associated with one individual defraying all the financial costs is missing. A man does not expect the woman to go to bed with him in exchange for his showing her a good time. The woman does not feel that she owes the man anything. They go "out" together as equals (Gallmeier et al 1997). "Out" now implies the norms are in flux. The young woman may ask the young man out. The individuals may not go out together but "see each other" at a party, or several women and men will go to the same place "just to hang." Although a particular man and woman may spend most of their time talking with each other they may not label their evening together as constituting a "date." Because there is less emphasis on traditional gender roles, the masks that hide the real person are discouraged. Honesty and intimacy are highly valued and self-disclosure is considered an important quality for both men and women (Gallmeier et al 1997; Knox et al 1997; Eder & Parker 1987; Franklin 1988; Kinney 1993).

Instead of being centered around an event, getting together emphasizes spontaneity. Males and females do not necessarily hang out as couples, but often meet in groups (Adler, Kless, & Adler 1992; Eder et al 1995; Moffat 1989). Sexuality is moved from the arena of exchange and the symbolism of a contest to mutual involvement, coadjuvancy, and mutual satisfaction. Individual feelings are important. Expressing one's inner-most thoughts, aspirations, trepidations, and goals are encouraged and welcomed regardless of one's sex (Gallmeier et al 1997; Knox et al 1997). Sexual involvement, intimacy, and personal relationships reflect the true feelings and desires rather than the need to prove oneself or pay a debt. Friendship, respect, communication, and common interests serve as the basis for decisions about whether to become intimate, sexually involved, or coupled.

The purpose of this exploratory study is to

examine and clarify dating norms as we enter the new millennium.

METHODS

The Data

The data for this study are based on the responses of 226 undergraduate students at a southeastern university who completed an anonymous confidential questionnaire of 22 items in regard to their current dating behavior. Sixty-seven (67%) percent of the respondents were female; twenty-three (23%) were male. Most (88%) of the sample were white; twelve (12%) were black.

Findings

About seventy percent (69.4%) of the respondents reported that they usually go out as a couple in contrast to going out as a group. Table 1 identifies several significant differences between "couple daters" and "group daters."

Couple daters, when compared to group daters, are older, began dating at a younger age, have had more dates with the same person and are more likely to be male. Other findings and the associated significance level include that couple daters in contrast to group daters, place more importance on dating someone of the same religion ($p < .003$), same race ($p < .014$), and that their parents approve of the person that they date ($p < .018$). Furthermore, couple daters are more serious about their relationships than group daters. On a continuum from "not involved" to "casually dating" to "dating exclusively" to "being engaged," couple daters were more often the latter two categories and group daters are more often the first two categories. Indeed, exclusive daters and the engaged were more likely to only date as a couple ($p < .005$). Couple and group daters also differ in what they do on dates. Couple daters tend to go out to dinner alone whereas group daters tend to go to a party ($p < .000$).

DISCUSSION

The data confirm that dating in a dyad is still the norm for individuals who regard their relationship as exclusive or involved. Eighty percent (80%) of persons who labeled their relationship this way reported they dated as a couple. Similarly, persons committed to each other reported considerable concern over racial or religious differences and whether their parents approved of the person they

were dating. Previous research (Knox et al 1997) has demonstrated the importance college students attach to homogamy as the nature of their relationship becomes more serious.

Just as dyad dating among serious daters is the norm, beginning to date early and dating for the first time are associated with dating in groups. This may represent a significant shift from the 1950s in which early uninvolved dating was in pairs. The social phenomenon driving the normativeness of group dating may be the general lack of early commitment to marriage. Increasingly, individuals are delaying marriage in favor of getting their careers established. In 1970, the median age at marriage for women was 20.6 and the median age for men was 22.5; by 1990, the median age for marriage for women was 24; for men it was 25.9 (*Statistical Abstract of the United States 1998*, Table 159).

Fear of marriage and wanting to avoid a divorce may also be operative in the delay of age at marriage. Giuliani, lafrate, and Rosnati (1998) found that individuals whose parents were divorced were more pessimistic about marriage. By dating in a group, individuals maintain the distance necessary to avoid falling in love by pairing off. Lee (1973) described this love style as ludic which is characterized by two behaviors, ensuring that one is involved with several people at once and not seeing any one person too often. The group context lends itself to ludic style dating.

The exploratory nature of this article cannot provide a comprehensive picture of dating and mate selection for all groups. Our data is limited to 20-something white females and to some extent, white males. Our data reveal nothing about the changes in dating patterns of people of color. Unfortunately, the literature in this area is highly limited. The most extensive literature on dating among groups of color deals with African Americans (see Staples 1991). Little work has been done on courtship among Native Americans, Asian Americans, and Latinos. According to most research, traditional dating patterns among blacks, as among whites and other groups, is more prevalent among the middle and upper class than the lower class. For the African American middle class, dating is typically sequential, occurring over the course of several stages: getting together in the teen

years, keeping company on the porch and, eventually, in the house under family supervision; group dating; and finally, individual one-on-one dating, engagement, and, most often, marriage (Scott 1988). Moreover, since the 1970s, blacks, like whites and several other groups, have been delaying marriage until later ages, which means they are dating or getting together for longer periods of time than in the past.

Discussing gender differences in dating in the context of social-learning theory, social scientist Susan Basow (1992) argues that men's dating scripts focus on planning and paying for the date as well as initiating sexual behavior, whereas women's scripts focus on enhancing their appearance, making conversation, and controlling sexual behavior. This paradigm clearly captures the traditional dating patterns of the 1950s. "Hanging out" or "getting together" is more adequately explained by a variation of exchange theory called equity theory. When used in this sense, the term *equity* signifies "fairness." Equity theory proposes that a person is attracted to another by a fair deal rather than a profitable exchange (Walster, Walster, & Traupman 1978). It argues that most people believe that they should benefit from a relationship in proportion to what they give to the relationship. Group dating not only becomes more egalitarian but it can serve as a filtering process (Klimek 1979). Individuals use a series of filters to sort through a large number of potential mates to arrive at the final choice. Each filter, in descending order, reduces the pool of eligible mates until relatively few eligibles are left. We then choose a mate from among this final group. Filter theories or process theories as they are sometimes called, suggest that many factors, are involved in mate selection.

What is needed are more investigations focusing on these different forms of mate selection. More empirical studies which compare traditional dating patterns with "hanging out" or other alternative mate selection processes could provide insight into the changing nature of gender role socialization and sex role expectations in the new millennium.

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