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Dating Choices of High School Students*

SALLY L. HANSEN**

Dating is experienced by most adolescents in our society as a prelude to mate selection. Three hundred and fifty-four white and black youth were studied to measure their dating-mating choices. Implications for teachers and practitioners, based on racial and gender differences, as well as perceived peer group influences are discussed.

Dating, whether for recreation, socialization, status, or courtship, emerged in our society only about fifty years ago and is experienced in some degree by most adolescents. With a few isolated exceptions, dating has replaced all other institutions for mate selection in our society.

Scholars have undertaken studies on the theory of mate selection, particularly the influence of cultural factors such as parental influence, religious training, socio-economic status, as well as age, race and gender.

Before one can answer the question of who marries whom and why, it is necessary to also look at the dynamics of what characteristics are important in a date, since dating is the prelude to mate selection. Forty years ago, Waller (1937) undertook a study of the dating patterns of college students and developed the hypothesis that for both men and women, dating choices were based on a prestige rating scheme which he called the "dating-rating" system. This system, he claimed, was highly competitive and materialistic with more value being placed on external variables (owning a car, plenty of money, appropriate dress) than on internal values (intelligence,

dependability, consideration). The idea of prestige rating was retested in the 1950's by Smith (1952) and Blood (1963) who found some support for Waller's findings, but concluded that personality factors were more important than prestige factors in dating and mate selection.

Other frameworks for analyzing dating behavior have evolved since Waller's rating-dating theory. Skipper and Nass (1966) viewed dating as purposive behavior with four functions: (a) dating as a form of recreation, (b) dating as a form of socialization, (c) dating as a means of status grading and status achievement, (d) dating as a form of courtship. In their study they found the girls' primary motivation in dating was *courtship* and the males' motivation was *recreation*. Coombs and Kenkel (1966) found marked differences between dating aspirations of males and females. Females had more rigid standards of judging dates and had higher expectations in terms of socially desired characteristics. Men had higher aspirations than females only in the area of physical attractiveness. Bell (1962) reported that few coeds saw the purpose of a college education as primarily providing an education, rather, they saw it as a side issue, while moving towards marriage.

A question of interest to educators in the 1970's is whether students today use a prestige rating system in their dating and mate selection process, or whether they select on the basis of personality. High school and college courses in Marriage and the Family usually cover the topic of dating and mate selection as a unit of study. It is

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Table 1.
 Dating Information of Respondents
 (Mean age of respondents - 16.4)

	Number	Percent
TOTAL NUMBER OF RESPONDENTS	354	
RACE		
Black	123	37.6
White	221	62.4
AGE OF FIRST DATE		
12 years of age	35	9.9
13 years of age	57	16.2
14 years of age	90	25.6
15 years of age	101	28.7
16, 17, and 18 years of age	50	14.2
Have never dated	19	5.4
PRESENT DATING BEHAVIOR		
Do not date	39	11.1
Almost never date	45	12.8
Random-date	72	23.8
Date two or three people	55	12.4
Date just one person, but not steadily.	34	9.7
Steady date	94	26.8
Engaged and married	12	3.4
FREQUENCY OF DATING		
Do not date	43	12.2*
Date occasionally	127	36.1
One date a week	72	20.5
Two-three dates a week	71	20.2
Three or more dates a week	39	11.1
DESIRE TO DATE		
Do not want to date	11	3.2
Date occasionally	93	27.0
Once a week	82	23.8
Two-three times a week	103	29.9
Three or more times a week	55	16.0

*The discrepancy between the present dating behavior and frequency of dating was caused by the fact that married students checked the "Do not Date" category in the latter instance.

common for discussions to revolve around the topic of what is important to consider in selecting a date or future mate. Previous research has done little to enlighten educators concerning differences that may exist in dating-mating choices based on race of an individual and the socio-cultural influences to which he has been exposed. This paper presents at least a partial answer to the former question as well as looking at racial and socio-cultural differences.

The participants for this study were 354 high school students between the ages of 15 and 19. (A detailed discussion of the theory, methodology, findings, and conclusions can be found in the author's dissertation.) The sample was evenly distributed between males and females, and the racial distribution was reflective of the racial distribution in the public high schools of the locale (62.4%

white and 37.6% black). Table 1 provides information about the respondents' dating behavior. Only a small percentage of the sample did not date or did not want to date. Approximately one-fourth of the sample steady-dated, and another one-fourth random dated. The frequency of dating indicated that slightly over one-third of the students dated only occasionally.

Respondents were asked to choose twelve items out of a total of thirty-three items on a Dating-Rating checklist in each of three columns. In the first column, the students were asked to check those characteristics they perceived as important to their peers in determining popularity as a date.¹ In the

¹ Referred to in the study as "perceived level of popularity."

Table 2.
Rank Order Choices on the Dating-rating Checklist

Column I Characteristics Important To Respondents' Peers	Column II Characteristics Important In a Date	Column III Characteristics Important In a Mate
1. Is pleasant and cheerful	1. Is pleasant and cheerful	1. Is pleasant and cheerful
2. Is neat in appearance	2. Is dependable	2. Is dependable
3. Has a sense of humor	3. Is considerate	3. Is considerate
4. Is dependable	4. Has a sense of humor	4. Is honest, straight-forward
5. Is popular with the opposite sex	5. Is neat in appearance	5. Is affectionate
6. Is natural	6. Is honest, straight-forward	6. Is natural
7. Is affectionate	7. Is natural	7. Is neat in appearance
8. Is considerate	8. Is affectionate	8. Has a sense of humor
9. Has a car or access to one	9. Has good sense, is intelligent	9. Has good sense, is intelligent
10. Knows how to dance	10. Thinks of things to do	10. Is a good listener
11. Is willing to neck on occasion	11. Is appropriately dressed	11. Is a good sport
12. Thinks of things to do	12. Is a good sport	12. Thinks of things to do
		13. Is appropriately dressed

second column, students were to choose characteristics important to them personally in a date;² and in the third column, they were to choose characteristics important to them in a future mate.³ Table 2 indicates the first twelve rank order choices of the respondents in each of the columns.

What Students Think is Important in a Date and Future Mate

The four characteristics chosen by the students as important to their peers that do not appear in the list of characteristics important in a date or future mate are:

"Is popular with the opposite sex"

"Has a car or access to one"

"Knows how to dance"

"Is willing to neck on occasion"

All of these characteristics are based on an external or prestige rating system, rather than on internal or personality characteristics of an individual. The external traits are those which are readily observable by others or denote materialistic or monetary worth of an individual. Internal traits may not be as readily observable to others, and often are characteristics pertaining to an individual's personality or self. In the columns where students were asked to choose characteris-

tics important to them in a date or future mate, their choices were all of an internal or personality nature, with two exceptions: "Is appropriately dressed" and "Is neat in appearance." It is interesting that these two characteristics involved external appearance of a person. How an individual dresses, standards of cleanliness, and grooming are obviously important to young people. A person's appearance is readily observable, but on a deeper level, may also be indicative of how a person feels about himself.

Differences were found between males and females in their choices of characteristics. Males at the perceived level of popularity, chose characteristics of an external or prestige nature; whereas females chose personality characteristics with the exception of the importance they placed on car ownership. At the dating level there were no significant differences in choices made by males and females. At the mate selection level, however, females had very definite choices of what they wanted in a future mate (all based on personality); whereas males had no significant choices of characteristics important to them in a future mate.

Black students, in contrast to white students, chose characteristics of an external nature both at the perceived level of popularity and also at the dating level, as reflected in Table 3. White students had

²Referred to in the study as "dating level."

³Referred to in the study as "mate selection level."

Table 3.
Choices on the Dating-Rating Checklist Classified by Race

Perceived Level of Popularity ¹		Dating Level ²		Mate Selection Level ³	
Black	White	Black	White	Black*	White
Has a car or access to one	Is pleasant and cheerful	Appropriately dressed	Pleasant and cheerful		Pleasant and cheerful
Knows how to dance	Has a sense of humor		Dependable		Dependable
	Is dependable		Considerate		Considerate
	Is natural		Sense of humor		Honest and straight-forward
	Is affectionate		Honest and straight-forward		Affectionate
	Is considerate		Natural		Natural
			Good sport		Good sport
					Good sense, is intelligent
					Wrote in their own characteristic:
					"Same religion"
					"Mature"

*No choices were made that were statistically significant at the .05 level.

¹ Characteristics important to respondents' peers.

² Characteristics important in a date.

³ Characteristics important in a mate.

definite choices of what they valued at all three of the levels, all of which reflected internal or personality choices. It should be noted that more of the black students in the sample were from families of a lower socio-economic level than were the white students. More than half of the black students came from homes where the father was semi-skilled, unskilled or unemployed; whereas only 14% of the white students' fathers were semi-skilled, unskilled or unemployed. Indeed, the differences between black and white students may, in reality, reflect socio-economic class differences.

Discussion

Perceived popularity based on external characteristics. The results indicated that students at the perceived norm level of what constitutes popularity, in general, made more choices of characteristics that were external or of a prestige nature than at the dating and

future mate selection levels. An interesting question for discussion with a student population would be, "Why do students perceive their peers as choosing external values, yet choose internal characteristics for themselves?" One might wonder whether students perceived that their peers have certain expectations, but never have an opportunity to explore if, in fact, that is what exists. Educators might use this difference in perception and reality to explore students' stereotypes, cultural norms, attitudes of others, and self-attitudes when choosing a date and future mate.

An individual perceives his dating choices as more serious than that of others. Young people at the perceived norm level may view dating as recreational and fun, and therefore, choose items such as having a car and knowing how to dance, which reflect those values. Two choices at the perceived norm level, "popularity with the opposite sex" and "willingness to neck on occasion" may reflect some feelings that students hold at an

emotional level rather than a cognitive level. When the choices of characteristics were based on what a student personally would like in a date, they may well have been made on a cognitive or more rational level. Dating as a form of behavior may be viewed as a more serious relationship at a personal level of choice rather than recreational or fun as it may be viewed at a level of perception.

Emotional and rational choices may differ.

A list of characteristics is limited in its comparability to a real life situation in which emotion and other factors can influence rational choices of a date or future mate. It would certainly be easier to logically choose from a list of characteristics important in a date in the classroom environment than it would be in the back seat of a car. While differences that may occur between emotional choices and rational choices are often divergent, a list of desired characteristics can serve as a springboard for discussion of values in terms of mate selection.

The white, Protestant middle-class ethic is not reflected by dating choices of black students. An interesting dimension for exploration is the effect of the white, middle-class, Protestant ethic that was reflected in white students' choices of characteristics such as pleasantness, dependability and consideration. White students, in general, placed more value on internal or personality characteristics of an individual; whereas black students placed more value on external characteristics. Explanations for the difference between black and white students' choices may be based on the lower socio-economic level of the black students as well as on differences in communication patterns that might exist in white and black families (especially between lower-class black families and middle to upper-middle class white families).

Gender and race differences do exist in choosing a date and mate. Parental and societal values appear to influence choices of adolescents. Hudson and Henze (1969) studied the value system of the college population of the 1960's and found that youth value the importance of personal characteristics in mate selection in much the same way as they did a generation ago. A person's environment and self-identity, as well as the

values he assimilates all appear to influence his choices of characteristics important in a date and future mate. Educators need to reevaluate what students value in dating and mate selection. This is necessary in light of social changes in society. The black-white and male-female differences in choices of what is valued in a date and future mate indicate a need to be aware of differences based on gender and race.

Implications

Future research on dating and mate selection may take on new perspectives as masculine and feminine roles in our society continue to change. Both sexes appear to be increasingly more egalitarian in the past few years. Will this more egalitarian view of roles provide a person-centered approach to dating and mate selection rather than a gender-oriented one? Or will women tend to increase at a substantially greater rate in the direction of an egalitarian relationship, thus continuing to create a gender difference in choices of characteristics?

Geographic location may be a determiner of attitudes toward dating and mate selection. This study was conducted in the South in a city of approximately 80,000. The city is conservative and although urban and a state capital, has retained many characteristics of a more rural area. Regional variations, as well as urban-rural differences might well be factors that should be compared in future research. Does a female from a rural town in the South, choose the same characteristics in a date and mate as a female from an urban area on the West coast?

This research tends to reveal the need for using classroom discussion with high school youth on the topic of dating and mate selection. Attitudes, beliefs and values on dating and mate selection are different for each individual. A student's gender, race, socio-cultural environment and geographic location all may influence how he views the topic.

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