

Finding Partners in the Newspaper:

Sex Differences In Personal Advertising

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During the past few years, a growing number of North American daily newspapers have provided space for personal advertising. Situated within classified advertising sections, personal advertisements contain requests for marriage, lasting relationships, companionship and casual sex. A decade ago, these columns were confined to specialty publications, such as the *New York Review of Books*, "underground newspapers" and homosexual publications. Now they are available in middle class daily newspapers. This increase in personal advertising reflects changing patterns of dating. Rising divorce rates, greater geographic mobility, independence from the family and loneliness and isolation in urban areas, are factors affecting the lives of many. These factors may be influencing some people to seek partners through advertising, either as an additional way to meet people or as the only means available to them.

For many years, people have met members of the opposite sex at dances, in class or at work. These are not necessarily formal introductions although the meetings take place in somewhat controlled situations. With increased personal freedom and changing values concerning dating and sexual behaviour, however, many North Americans are beginning to seek less formal and conventional ways of finding partners (Godwin, 1973; Hunt and Hunt, 1977). Although advertising for marriage partners has been a long accepted strategy for certain cultural minorities (Bend, 1952; Mason, 1931; Jedlicka, 1979), newspaper personal columns represent an unconventional way of finding partners for most North Americans. Nevertheless, advertisements clearly provide a way to meet people which may be seen as preferable to organizations such as singles bars and clubs where one has to put oneself and one's desires

on public display (Hunt and Hunt, 1977). Given a lack of opportunity to meet members of the opposite sex through introductions from family or friends or through work and other organizations, placing an advertisement for a partner is one strategy that is available to many people, if they wish to use it.

Theoretical Framework

The analysis of advertisements for partners for sexual encounters and other forms of relationship is, of necessity, a recent phenomenon. The few studies which do exist, however, have analysed such diverse issues as the characteristics people ask for in New York Yiddish papers (Bend, 1952), the bargaining process involved in mate selection (Cameron et. al., 1977) and the use of advertising when structural barriers prevent meeting a partner in a more conventional way (Jedlicka, 1978, 1979). Journalistic studies have implied that advertisers are "social undesirables" or those looking for "kinky sex". These reports also emphasise the code language which is sometimes used to disguise identities and real intentions and suggest that traditional sex roles—emphasis on appearance for women and status for men—play an important part in this form of courtship (Godwin, 1973; Williams, 1979).

The research reported here adds to the growing literature on this particular form of mate selection. In particular, it focuses on the self-presentation of the advertiser and conceptions of ideal partners. Knowledge about mate selection in the North American sociological literature comes primarily from surveys of college students (Hill, 1945; McGinnis, 1959; Hudson and Henze, 1969; Wakil, 1975). From these studies we know that values relating to mate selection are relatively stable and consistent over time, with the greatest change in the declining value of chastity. Males continue to place greater value on good looks and

domesticity for females, and females continue to value intelligence, education, ambition and good financial prospects higher for males. Both sexes place the highest value on emotional stability, dependable character and mutual attraction (although not in exactly the same order). And both sexes express a preference for the husband to be older than the wife.

At least some of these expressed values are translated into behaviour. Previous research on dating and mate selection indicates a "mating gradient," meaning that men tend to marry "down" in terms of age, education, occupational status, income and height (Leslie, 1979: 397-398). Although the theory of "social homogamy" states that people with similar social characteristics tend to marry, "similar" usually does not mean "identical." Reversals in this mating gradient are correlated with higher rates of marriage breakdown (Cherlin, 1979; Bumpass and Sweet, 1972).

Given the discussion over the past ten years of increasing egalitarianism between the sexes, one might speculate that the mating gradient is no longer significant or important. Evidence to support the contention of increasing egalitarianism between the sexes is by no means unequivocal and suggestions about the demise of the mating gradient are even less well documented (Amiel, 1978). The research presented below, therefore, investigates this question through the analysis of newspaper advertisements for partners. Although the content analysis of the advertisements cannot answer all the questions one might ask in relation to the people who place advertisements, it does allow us to compare the presentation of self, ideal mate and the type of relationship desired by the men and women using this approach to contact people.

Methodology

We hypothesised that despite the so-called "sexual revolution" and the women's

liberation movement of the past two decades, the double standard of sexual behaviour and reliance on traditional sex roles are still prevalent in dating and mate selection. Men still search for younger, physically attractive women who have a status slightly lower than their own. Women still want older and taller men with greater economic and educational resources than themselves: that is, men they can look up to both figuratively and literally.

Two hundred advertisements from the companion columns of the *Toronto Star* in March and September of 1979 were analysed. This newspaper was selected because it is a typical urban middle class Canadian newspaper, which has experienced a recent bourgeoning of such advertisements. No claim is made that people who place such advertisements are typical of those looking for mates in the larger population. Actively seeking love and revealing one's loneliness is still considered less appropriate behaviour than waiting for love to find us. Therefore, those who advertise for sex and love may be less traditional than the general population because they are using an unconventional method of dating.

The advertisements were analysed in terms of how people described themselves and their potential mates, and types of relationships which they said that they wanted. For self-description and description of ideal mate we used nine descriptive categories: age, occupation/education, financial status, physical characteristics, personality, interests, nationality/race/religion, marital status and sexual preference. Each advertiser was scored on the categories used rather than the number of references within each category. Thus, when a person used five adjectives to refer to his or her personality, it was counted as one reference to personality. Similarly, if a person referred himself as "tall, slim, sincere and gay," it was scored as one reference to physical characteristics, one to personality and one to sexual preference.

Typical advertisements read as follows:

"Attractive Aquarian, 31, seeks good natured, supportive, petite woman to compliment his creative mind and sensitive soul. (Box number)"

"Attractive, black female, age 29, seeks serious companion, no colour barrier. Please send reply and recent photo to Star. (Box number)"

Most advertisements are quite straightforward and do not present major problems in classifying the information.

Using content analysis, one cannot, of course, check the validity of the advertisers self-description. If a person was really interested in obtaining replies, he or she would emphasize those characteristics thought to be desirable by potential mates. In fact, Williams (1979) claims that "all advertisers are good-looking and successful, according to themselves." Nevertheless, the advertisements do provide us with data on which characteristics are perceived as highly valued on today's "market" in so far as this is reflected in the descriptions advertisers use.

Findings

Of the two hundred advertisements that were analysed from the *Toronto Star*, 147 or 73.5% were placed by men, forty-six or 23.0% were placed by women. One percent were placed by those who did not reveal their sex and 2.5% were placed by couples. Because the numbers within these last two categories were so small, we excluded them from the analysis.

Description of Self

The most frequent way in which advertisers described themselves was in terms of age. Seventy-nine percent of the sample mentioned their age, although this was sometimes ex-

TABLE 1
Age of Advertiser by Sex

AGE	SEX OF ADVERTISER		TOTAL (N = 193) (Percentage)
	Male (N = 147) (Percentage)	Female (N = 46) (Percentage)	
Under 20	3	0	2
20 - 29 years	18	20	18
30 - 39 years	32*	24*	31
40 - 49 years	23*	15*	21
50 and over	7	8	7
No age given	17*	33*	21

* Sex difference significant at .05 level. (Chi Square)

TABLE 2
Description of Self by Sex

DESCRIPTION CATEGORIES	SEX OF ADVERTISER		TOTAL (N = 193) (Percentage)
	Male (N = 147) (Percentage)	Female (N = 46) (Percentage)	
Age	83*	67*	79
Occupation/Education	32	28	31
Financial Status	14	9	13
Physical Characteristics	63*	89*	69
"attractive"	21*	52*	28
other physical	41	37	40
Personality	37	39	37
Interests	20*	28*	22
Nationality/Race/Religion	25*	35*	27
Marital Status	24	26	25
Sexual Preference	10	7	9
Other	20	24	21
No Description	10*	0*	8

* Sex difference significant at .05 level. (Chi Square)

pressed in approximate terms. Most of the advertisers were between the ages of thirty and thirty-nine years old. Although this holds true for both sexes, the second largest group of men were in the 40-49 age group, while the second largest group of women were 20-29 years old. Twenty-one percent of the sample, or thirty-three percent of the women and seventeen percent of the men, did not reveal their age.

The self-descriptions of men and women do differ somewhat in terms of the relative importance of certain information. Women most frequently give descriptions of their physical characteristics, their age and their personalities. For men, the comparable descriptors are age, physical characteristics, interests, nationality/race/religion. It is also apparent that men were more likely than women to give no description of themselves at all. In terms of the self-descriptions given, however, men em-

phasized their height and weight whereas women most often described themselves as "attractive." The women also used a variety of adjectives, such as petite, slim, blonde or young-looking. Only one woman said that she was overweight, and no men said that they were short.

In the other five categories used to describe the information in the advertisements, women and men are essentially the same.

Description of Ideal Mate

The most frequently used category to describe ideal mate was age. However, both sexes were less likely to refer to the age of their ideal mate than to their own age. Personality and physical characteristics were the second most frequently used categories and high status/education/money was the third most frequent category.

TABLE 3

Description of Ideal Mate by Sex

DESCRIPTION CATEGORIES	SEX OF ADVERTISER		TOTAL (N = 193) (Percentage)
	Male (N = 147) (Percentage)	Female (N = 46) (Percentage)	
Age References	38*	50*	41
Range	15*	37*	20
Younger	19*	0*	15
Older	4*	13*	6
Personality	35*	48*	38
Physical Characteristics	35*	46*	38
"attractive"	18	17	18
other physical	18*	28*	20
Common Interests	14	17	15
Marital Status	7*	28*	12
Sexual Reference	5	0	4
High Status/Education/Money	5*	30*	11
Nationality/Race/Religion	7	9	7
Other	18*	30*	21
No Description	17	11	16

* Sex difference significant at .05 level. (Chi Square)

Women were most likely to describe their ideal mate in terms of age. This usually consisted of sketching out an age range extending from two years below their own age to five years above. No woman explicitly asked for a younger man, contrary to Amiel's (1978) suggestion, but only 13% explicitly asked for an older man. Only those age ranges that were *exclusively* older or younger were coded as such. The rest were classified as "age range." However, many of the women advertisers' age ranges implied a preference for older men or men of their own age.

The second most frequent way of referring to ideal mate was in personality terms. Women said that they wanted men who were "sincere," "emotionally secure," "mature," "compassionate" and "confident." And thirdly, women referred to physical characteristics, asking for tall and attractive men.

Men most frequently referred to the age of their ideal companion as well, but with a lower frequency than women. Men were also more likely to ask for younger partners rather than simply stating as age range. Nineteen percent of the men explicitly asked for a younger woman—often five to fifteen years younger. Male advertisers mentioned physical and personality characteristics of their ideal mate with the same frequency as women. Although a wide variety of personality terms was used, some of the more common were "warm," "sincere," "intelligent," "inspiring," and "outgoing." With respect to physical characteristics, men most often said that they wanted "attractive" and "slim" women.

The major sex differences in the descriptions of ideal mate were within the categories "age references," "marital status," "high status," "personality" and "other." Women were more likely to mention an age range which started a few years below their own and extended five or more years above their own.

Men more often asked for women younger than themselves. This was true even among the "gay" advertisers: men asked for younger partners, women were less specific about age.

With respect to marital status, women requested "unattached" partners far more often than did men. Men seldom made such a request, but occasionally asked for "attached" women with whom to have sexual relationships.

Very few men said that they wanted high status or wealthy women, but the few who did asked for wealthy *generous* women. A few stated that age was no barrier. On the other hand, 30% of the women asked for a man with high status, high education, or money. One woman, who referred to herself as "the widow of a business executive," was looking for a new husband of "similar status." A female Ph.D. was looking for a man "of similar status." Only five percent of the male advertisers said that they wanted a woman with high status or money.

There were, therefore, more sex differences when describing ideal mates than when describing themselves. Women were more likely to provide fuller, more detailed descriptions. They made more references to age, personality, physical characteristics, marital status, lifestyle and personal habits (which we classified as "other"), and the wealth and status of their ideal mates.

Type of Relationship or Encounter

Most advertisers were looking for serious involvements with the opposite sex. Thirty-percent were in this category. An additional twenty-eight percent did not make explicit the kind of relationship or encounter they were looking for. Eighteen percent of the sample were asking for casual sexual encounters which we labelled "recreational sex."

Women most frequently said that they wanted a "serious" or "lasting" relationship. If we combine those requests with the women who explicitly mentioned marriage, thirty-seven percent of the women wanted "involvements." Only one woman advertised for "recreational sex": a married "career woman" looking for a discreet affair with an unattached man. The other women in the sample were fairly equally divided into the other categories of relationships.

If we combine the marital and "serious" relationships for the men, we find that twenty-eight percent are looking for "involvements."

Another twenty-two percent of the men were asking for "recreational sex," compared with two percent of the women. Men advertising for serious relationships and those requesting recreational sex formed two distinct groups of comparable size. Further analysis by age gave us no clues as to how these groups differ. Another method of research, such as interviewing the advertisers, could perhaps shed some light on this question.

Discussion

The fact that more men than women place advertisements in the "companions wanted" columns of the *Toronto Star* is a finding which is reported for other areas in North America (Goodwin, 1973; Cameron et. al., 1977; William, 1979). The entire procedure costs money, requires taking the initiative to telephone those who have replied by mail and arranging meetings after the initial screening. Since most women have been socialized to accept a more passive role in dating, it is not surprising that women advertise less than men. Thus, even the placing of ads may reflect a continuing inequality between men and women arising from our definitions of which behaviour is and is not appropriate for women.

There is also some risk involved in this kind of dating, as there is no protection against aggression or embarrassment except one's own screening process. And there are no norms to provide guidelines for interaction, except "common sense." Since women are still en-

TABLE 4

Type of Relationship by Sex

RELATIONSHIP	SEX OF ADVERTISER		TOTAL (N = 193) (Percentage)
	Male (N = 147) (Percentage)	Female (N = 46) (Percentage)	
Recreational Sex	22*	2*	18
Involvement	28*	37*	30
Serious/Lasting	22	26	23
Marriage	6	11	7
Companionship	9	13	9
Homosexual	9	11	9
Other	3	9	5
Not Stated	29	28	28

* Sex difference significant at .05 level. (Chi Square)

couraged to be more reticent with strangers in dating situations, partly out of fear of rape or damaged reputations, and are still not *encouraged* to conspicuously take the initiative in dating situations, they are less likely to place advertisements.

Although some journalists, such as Amiel (1978), have implied that the age gradient in dating is declining, the findings of Cameron et. al. and the present study do not support such a conclusion. Many men requested younger women, and no woman explicitly asked for a younger man thus supporting the traditional idea that men should be older than the women they date or marry. It should be noted that the continuation of this ideal in a time of high divorce rates and where women outlive men, means that older women are less likely to remarry after divorce or during widowhood than are older men. Kuzel and Krishnan (1973) have already documented that Canadian men have higher remarriage rates than women, particularly after the age of thirty. If women continue to seek partners older than themselves they are in a position of drawing upon a population which is considerably smaller than the number of women who might wish to remarry. Men do not encounter this problem, of course, because the number of women younger than themselves continues to expand. Perpetuation of the age gradient ideal thus has an impact on lifestyles and family formation which we are only recently beginning to consider.

It could also be argued that maintenance of the age gradient in relationships inhibits the pursuit of egalitarian relationships. The older man is often more socially and sexually experienced, more occupationally established with a higher income and more able to exert influence over the woman by nature of these greater resources (Gillespie, 1971). The same could be said of the height gradient, which was strictly adhered to by many of the advertisers.

Women explicitly asked for tall men, and men in turn described themselves as tall or gave their specific height. No male advertiser admitted to being below five feet ten inches tall and no man described himself as short. Maintenance of the height gradient augments inherent physical differences between the sexes, granting men a more powerful position.

Women in this study were more likely to support the status gradient, by asking for men who had similar or high education, occupational status or income. Many of the female advertisers seemed to be "gold-diggers," with the emphasis they placed on finding a high status or wealthy professional or businessman. This reinforces the idea that the man should be the primary bread-winner and the one who confers status on the couple. Women who had already attained a high status on their own (businesswomen, professionals and those with higher degrees) still requested high status men. Obviously, the higher a woman's status, the fewer men will be able to surpass her status.

In describing their ideal mates, men often requested younger, sexually attractive women. Five percent of the men and none of the women made sexual references, such as asking for "uninhibited," "broadminded," "fullfigured" women, "experienced older woman" or "hedonistic lady." This can be largely explained by the type of relationship people were seeking. Twenty-two percent of the men and only two percent of the women were advertising for "recreational sex." The fact that men ask for casual sex and women do not probably reflects cultural conditioning. Women have been encouraged to desire sex only in emotionally close relationships and not to appear too sexually available to strangers.

Ten percent of the male advertisers did not describe themselves at all, except by reference to their sex or age. Similarly, more men than

women neglected to describe their ideal mate. In this form of dating, lack of details of oneself or mate seems to be a crucial omission. There are two possible reasons why men submitted less descriptive advertisements than women. First, many men were looking for casual sex and may therefore be less particular about the social and personality characteristics of their mate. Women, on the other hand, were generally looking for a serious and lasting relationship and would be more concerned with emotional stability, financial position and marital status. Secondly, this lack of description in men's advertisements may reflect a more fundamental difference in the socialization of the sexes. Numerous authors have commented on men's difficulty in discussing their feelings and revealing their vulnerabilities to others (Jourard, 1964; Goldberg, 1976; Tolson, 1977). Women seem to spend more time discussing their relationships and ideal mates with each other and may, therefore, become more articulate on this topic.

Although we can gain little insight into why people advertise from content analysis of advertisements, we are given a few hints. Many advertisers mentioned that they were tired of the "disco scene" or the "meat market approach" in singles bars. Others suggested that they had recently moved to the city or were recently separated. Advertising for mates is a more anonymous but less aggressive way to approach potential mates than some other methods.

Although methods of dating have changed considerably throughout the past two decades, both sexes have retained many traditional expectations for their mates. The double standard of sexuality is still prevalent. Men often advertise for casual sex; women seldom do. Men sometimes describe their ideal mate in sexual terms. Women describe men using physical, but non-sexual adjectives. Women request unattached men for serious and lasting

relationships, but men are divided between those who want serious relationships and those who want recreational sex.

Both sexes frequently see their potential partners within traditional sex roles. Very few men asked for career women or "liberated" women and several of these were obviously defining "liberated" in sexual terms. Several men asked for bright or intelligent women to assist them with their careers. This should not imply that all advertisements revealed a double standard of behaviour or traditional sex roles. There were a number of advertisements placed by single parents of both sexes, in which men ask for intelligent career-oriented women, women ask for sensitive and quiet men, and people of both sexes look for egalitarian relationships. However, these advertisers were certainly in the minority. We can conclude from these data therefore, that there is neither equality, nor androgyny apparent among the people who resort to this new form of dating.

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