
SOCIETY

Does Dating Work?

"Choosing Mates—The American Way" by Martin King Whyte, in *Society* (Mar.-Apr. 1992), Rutgers—The State Univ., New Brunswick, N.J. 08903.

The history of courtship in America begins with the Puritans (enough said), proceeds to the modest sexual revolution of the 18th century and the counter-revolution of the 19th, and then arrives, around the turn of the century, at the familiar practice called "dating." According to University of Michigan sociologist Martin King Whyte, however, all those centuries of romantic evolution may not have done much to improve one's chances of finding a good mate.

Dating was born among middle and upper-middle-class students, and by the 1920s, the earlier custom of "calling"—in which a young man, if invited, would call on a nubile maiden at her home, with her mother hovering protectively nearby—had largely disappeared. Not incidentally, Whyte says, more of the initiative in courtship shifted to the men.

America's prosperity had a great deal to do with the rise of dating. The expansion of secondary schooling and higher education provided "an arena in which females and males could get to know one another informally over many years," he notes. "Schools also organized athletic, social, and other activities in which adult supervision was minimal." Colleges provided an almost complete escape from parental supervision.

Increased affluence freed young people from the necessity of helping to put bread on the family table, and gave them the money and leisure to date. Whole industries sprang up to serve them. Youths could visit an ice cream parlor or an amusement park, dance to popular music recordings, or go to the movies. Automobiles not only got young people away from home but "provided a semi-private space with abundant romantic and sexual possibilities."

By contrast with "calling," Whyte points out, the main purpose of dating, at least in its initial stages, was not the selection of a spouse but the pursuit of pleasure, and perhaps romance. Eventually, of course, dating often led to "going steady," and from there to engagement and marriage.

In the popular mind, dating became the rough equivalent of shopping. Youths would make modest purchases in a variety of stores, have a good time doing so, and eventually find the best available "product" for them—a Mr. or Miss Right. A happy and enduring marriage would ensue.

The problem, Whyte says, is that things do not seem to work out so neatly. It's not that avid players of the dating game never find marital bliss, but that their playing the game doesn't seem to help. A survey of 459 women in the Detroit area Whyte conducted in 1984 revealed no clear connection between dating experience and a successful marriage. "Women who had married their first sweethearts were just as likely to have enduring and satisfying marriages as women who had married only after considering many alternatives." Nor was there any discernible difference between the marriages of women who were virgins when they wed and those of women who were not. One thing did seem to make a difference. Those women who recalled being "head over heels in love" when they wed had more successful marriages. Their memories were probably colored by subsequent experience, Whyte acknowledges, but nothing they said contradicted the familiar wisdom of poets and songwriters. Dating may not work, he concludes, but perhaps love really does conquer all.

Getting Ahead at Community Colleges

"Community Colleges and Baccalaureate Attainment" by Kevin J. Dougherty, in *Journal of Higher Education* (Mar.-Apr. 1992), Ohio State Univ. Press, 1070 Carmack Rd., Columbus, Ohio 43210; "The Community College at the Crossroads: The Need for Structural Reform" by Kevin J. Dougherty, in *Harvard Educational Review* (Aug. 1991), Gutman Library, Ste. 349, 6 Appian Way, Cambridge, Mass. 02138-3752.

Students who enter community colleges hoping to go on eventually to earn a bachelor's degree from a four-year institution may find themselves facing an unexpected obstacle: the

community college itself.

Although community colleges stress vocational education, some 30-40 percent of entering students have visions of going on to obtain

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