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RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN
TRADITIONAL AND CONTEMPORARY
DATING STYLES AND
MALE COMMITMENT LEVEL

By

Francis B. Gantner

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**Relationship between Traditional and Contemporary Dating Styles
and Male's Commitment Level**

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Abstract

This research aimed at discovering a relationship between dating style and male commitment. I hypothesized that traditional dating, where the male plays the initial active role and couples reserve sexual activity for marriage, would better predict male commitment due to effort justification theory and gain-loss theory. However I also acknowledged a counter hypothesis predicting a correlation between contemporary dating, with blurred gender roles and sexual boundaries, and male commitment due to behaviorist theory. Fifty-seven males took a survey assessing dating style and commitment level to find if either of these relationships existed. After data analysis, I found that female initial passivity, couples similarity in values and beliefs, and establishment of sexual boundaries to have a significant relationship with male commitment.

Introduction

This study aims to understand if traditional or contemporary style dating better predicts male long-term commitment. The main hypothesis claims that traditional style dating, where women initially take a more passive role while men pursue, would better predict male commitment than contemporary dating, where men are not expected to take the primary role in pursuing the relationship. In regards to male commitment, theoretical support for traditional dating lies in cognitive dissonance theory (Festinger, 1957) and gain-loss theory (Aronson & Linder, 1965); while behaviorist theory supports a more contemporary style of dating (Ferster & Skinner, 1957).

According to Turner (2003), gender roles, male effort, and sexual expectations serve as the three main differences between traditional and contemporary dating styles. In traditional dating, males are expected to take a more active role, exert more effort, and couples reserve sexual activity for marriage. In contemporary dating, the gender roles and sexual boundaries have become blurred and men are no longer initially exerting more effort than women. This study also realizes that relationships will typically fall somewhere between traditional and contemporary; therefore the survey will measure romantic relationships on a continuous scale between the two extremities. This measure will account for the complexities of human relationships.

Cognitive Dissonance Theory and Traditional Dating

The application of cognitive dissonance theory, specifically the sub-theory of effort justification, predicts that traditional dating would better predict male commitment than contemporary dating. Cognitive dissonance states that psychological discomfort arises when an

individual holds two or more incompatible thoughts, attitudes, or beliefs. This discomfort operates as a motivational force for the individual to reduce dissonance by altering existing cognitions to construct a more compatible thought system (Festinger, 1955).

Several studies have shown the extensive impact of cognitive dissonance on human cognition, outlook, and behavior. A particular area of life largely impacted by cognitive dissonance occurs after decision making. After every decision individuals will experience some tension because every option has both positive and negative facets. Since individuals like to preserve their self-worth they feel uncomfortable knowing the negative aspects of a decision. Therefore individuals choose to focus on the positive features of their decision and downplay any negative outcomes.

Brehm's (1956) study confirmed this application of cognitive dissonance to decision making. Specifically, Brehm conducted an experiment in which women rated eight different kitchen appliances in terms of attractiveness. As a reward for their participation these women were given a choice of two appliances that they rated equally attractive. The women were then asked to rate the two appliances again. While these participants initially rated these two appliances equally attractive, after their decision, they rated the chosen appliance more attractive than the one rejected. Again, the women were focusing on embellishing the positives of their decisions while neglecting the positives of the rejected appliance (Brehm, 1956).

Ehrlich Guttman, Schonbach, and Mills research (1957) also confirms the power of cognitive dissonance on human attitudes. Their study followed individuals who had recently purchased a car. Ehrlich found that after participants had bought a new car they emphasized the positive qualities of their vehicle and downplayed the positives of others. According to Ehrlich's

research, after an individual invested time, energy, and money into this purchase, they wanted to think of the purchase as a good decision. Following these decision-making studies, my research aims at investigating if traditional dating, where a man continually decides to invest time, energy, and money into a romantic relationship, would better predict future commitment as males justify these decisions.

Stemming from cognitive dissonance theory, effort justification states that an individual prizes items earned in order to justify their efforts to obtain. For example, Aronson and Mills' (1959) ran a study dividing participants into three groups requiring different initiations to join a club. The severe initiation group was asked to read out loud a list of obscene words while the mild initiation group read sexual but not obscene material out loud. The control group did not have to go under any sort of initiation to join. Results showed that the severe initiation group liked the club significantly more than the mild initiation and control groups. This study suggests that the individuals prized the club more in order to justify their embarrassing initiation (Aronson & Mills, 1959).

Gerald and Mathewson (1966) took this group initiation study to a more severe level by introducing electric shocks into initiation requirements. In order to join the club, the first group of participants received severe electric shocks while the second group received mild electric shocks. The severe electric shock group liked the group significantly more than the mild electric shock group. This research does not suggest that humans enjoy painful events but rather that individuals justify painful or strenuous efforts by greatly appreciating the goal achieved by those efforts. Following these group initiation studies, my research aims at investigating if traditional dating, where males undergo an "initiation" of dating in order to form an exclusive relationship, is more predictive of male commitment.

Gain-Loss Theory and Traditional Dating

An application of Aronson's gain-loss theory of interpersonal attraction also supports a more traditional form of dating. Gain-loss theory suggests that humans appreciate increasing rewards rather than constant rewards. In application to this study, gain-loss theory would predict that men would value the increasing affection of a woman rather than affection from the onset (Aronson & Linder, 1965).

Aronson and Linder's (1965) framed an experiment that supported their gain-loss theory. In this experiment the participant was placed in a situation where they become aware of another participant's opinion of them several times throughout the experiment. However the other participant was really a paid confederate. The real participants were randomly assigned into one of four groups which received different sets of feedback from the confederate. Two groups received consistent feedback, either all negative or all positive. The gain group received negative evaluations at first but gradually received more positive ones; while the loss group received increasingly negative feedback. Aronson and Linder found that the gain group esteemed their confederates more than the positive group; while the loss group disliked their confederates more than the negative group.

Like Aronson and Linder's (1965) experiment, I hypothesize that males will value females' affection when it is increased gradually over time in a traditional dating context. The traditional dating style mirrors the gain group in their study. Women gradually show more affection for men after the men take the active role to pursue the relationship. The contemporary dating style mirrors the positive group where women show their appreciation from the start and may even initiate the relationship.

Behaviorist Theory and Contemporary Dating

While this study predicts that traditional dating will be more predictive of male commitment, a counter hypothesis must be acknowledged that may support contemporary dating and commitment. Application of Skinner's behaviorist theory may support this contemporary style. In short, Skinner proposed that individuals commit to behavior that brings positive outcomes, a process known as operant conditioning. This rewarded behavior is known as operant behavior while the positive outcomes are called reinforcers. Under this theory, males may commit more to contemporary females that reinforce him by pursuing the relationship than traditional females that take a passive role (Ferster & Skinner, 1957).

Reward Theory of Attraction

Reward theory of attraction is a popular explanation for the success of interpersonal relationships. Basically, it proposes that individuals seek out and commit to relationships with the maximum reward at the minimum cost. The following five basic qualities are highly predictive of attraction and relationship success:

1. Competence: individuals with positive qualities come with more relational rewards at the same cost.
2. Physical Attractiveness: physically attractive individuals simply bring aesthetic rewards to those they are in relationship with. Walster, Aronson, Abraham, and Rottman's research (1966) found physical attractiveness to be the number one predictor of romantic involvement. Walster and her colleagues set up University of Minnesota students on blind dates. At the end of the date students were asked if they

- would pursue anything beyond that first date with the other individual. More than any other characteristic, physical attractiveness predicted if a second date was pursued.
3. Similarity: similar individuals verify and accept the other person's beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors.
 4. Reciprocated feelings: obviously people who like the individual bring the rewards of praise, acceptance, and to a certain extent self-esteem.
 5. Other rewards (Aronson, 2008).

While reward theory can also explain a possible connection between contemporary dating and male commitment, this theory will also be measured by itself. The purpose of this measurement is to see if dating style has a greater impact on relationships than even the popular theory of rewards.

Commitment according to Sternberg's Triangle of Love

Sternberg's Triangle of Love states that the levels of commitment, passion, and intimacy can define any relationship. Commitment, in broader terms, is defined as sticking with something until a desired goal is achieved. In this study, commitment will be measured according to Sternberg's definition (Sternberg, 1987).

According to Sternberg, two components make up commitment—the short-term and long-term decision. The short-term decision occurs when a lover chooses to love their partner; while the long-term decision occurs when the lover decides to preserve that love, even through trying times. Individuals in relationships have not necessarily made both these decisions. Often times, especially in an individualistic culture, the short-term decision precedes the long-term decision. The long-term decision of commitment sustains a relationship through bad times in

hopes of good times ahead. The long-term decision will be measured in this study because the level of commitment in this decision differs according to each individual in relationship (Sternberg, 1987).

Methods

Participants

Participants in this study included 57 males associated with a midsized Christian university in rural central Illinois. Every male was either dating exclusively, engaged, or married. Participants' ages ranged from eighteen to forty. Fifty-four of the volunteers were undergraduate students, one was an ONU alumnus, and two were current professors. A frequency chart for grade level of students is available in Table 1 as well as detailed demographic information on the participants' relationships in Table 2.

Twelve professors from the behavioral sciences, physical sciences, mathematics, engineering, computer science, business, and education departments assisted in recruiting students. Known students in relationships were also given the opportunity to participate via email. Participation was encouraged by extra credit and/or a \$5 Starbucks gift card raffle. Two survey takers neglected the back side of the survey. Therefore, only 55 surveys were analyzed in their entirety.

Materials

Traditional vs. Contemporary Dating Measures

Turner's (2003) dating history research served as the foundation for the dating style measurement. Again Turner explains that traditional dating differs from contemporary dating in

gender roles and attitudes on premarital sexual activity. The traditional dating script expects males to initially exert more effort, take the active role, and reserve sexual activity for marriage. Contemporary views expect dating to follow a give/take exchange relationship and approves of sexual activity in several contexts other than marriage. Therefore I developed eleven questions in Section I to address the differences in gender roles and three questions in Section II to address premarital sexual behavior (Turner, 2003).

For Section I (see Appendix) participants indicated whether items were more descriptive of their role or their partner's role in dating. Each participant responded on a five point Likert scale ranging from "Primarily myself" to "Primarily my partner." High scores were intended to indicate a more traditional style, while lower and neutral scores were intended to indicate a more contemporary dating style.

In Section II, questions 8-10 (see Appendix) inquired of the couple's attitude toward premarital sexual behavior and the establishment of sexual boundaries. Males reported their agreement to each statement on a five point Likert scale with endpoints ranging from "Strongly disagree" to "Strongly agree."

Reward Theory

In Section II, questions 1-7 (see Appendix) assess the popular reward theory of attraction. These questions were placed on a five point Likert scale with endpoints at "Strongly disagree" and "Strongly agree." These questions are based on the five primary awards of proximity, competence, physical attractiveness, similarity, and reciprocated feelings.

Commitment Level Measures

Commitment was assessed according to Sternberg's Triangle of Love Theory. Sternberg divided the definition of commitment into two subcomponents—the short-term and long-term decision (Sternberg, 1987). Section II, questions 11-25 (see Appendix) assessed commitment and came directly from Grohol's Triangular Theory of Love Scales. Questions 11, 20, 22, and 23 determined short-term decision while the rest gauge long-term decision (Grohol, 2007).

All of the questions pertaining to commitment were rated on a five point Likert scale ranging from "Strongly Disagree" to "Strongly Agree." Agreement with these statements signified a greater level of commitment while disagreement indicated a lower level.

Demographics

Demographic information was collected in Section III, questions 1-4 (see Appendix). Participants reported the distance between themselves and their partner, how long they had known their partner, the length of their romantic relationship, and their grade level.

Procedure

Participants took a 5-10 minute survey assessing dating style and commitment level (see Appendix). Specifically, participants met in a classroom for survey administration and were then informed of possible risks, time needed for survey administration, and the voluntary nature of this study. Individuals took the survey and filled out a separate piece of paper with their name and email for participation in the raffle. For anonymity purposes raffle sheets were entirely separate from the survey. After survey completion participants were briefly informed of the purposes of the study and given contact information for follow up questions or concerns.

Results

Descriptive Statistics

Traditional vs. Contemporary Dating Style

Section I and Section II, questions 8-11 consisted of the dating style measure. These questions were checked for internal consistency using the statistically computed measure of Cronbach's Alpha. The resulting coefficient was .32 did not meet the minimum requirement of .70 to be considered internally consistent. Internal consistency checks whether different questions in a set are assessing the same trait. An internal consistency test was imperative for this scale to ensure that questions were truthfully measuring the traditional/contemporary dating style construct. A low internal consistency indicates a need for future revision on the instrument. Since this measure was not internally consistent, it cannot be used for analysis as a whole or set scale (Aiken & Groth-Marnat, 2006). Additional factor analytic work was not able to establish the dimensionality of the scale, so results were analyzed at the question (not scale) level.

Reward Theory of Attraction

Section II, questions 1-7 also failed to meet the minimum requirements for internal consistency with a coefficient of .452. Therefore these questions were also analyzed at a question level rather as a complete scale.

Commitment

Section II, questions 11-25 had a mean of 4.54. These averages indicate a high level of agreement to questions and therefore a general high commitment level among participants. The same internal consistency statistic showed these questions to be highly reliable at a Cronbach's

Alpha measure of 0.901. Fourteen of the participants answered "Strongly agree" to every question on the commitment score, which placed them in the perfect commitment group. Thirty-seven individuals had a less than perfect commitment score and comprised the other group.

Inferential Statistics

For data analysis participants were divided into two groups based on their commitment level. Individuals that strongly agreed with each commitment question represented the perfect commitment level group and those with a less than perfect commitment score formed the other group.

Female Passivity

An independent samples t-test compared the "perfect commitment" group to all those that had less than perfect levels on the dependent variable of female passivity. The perfect commitment group, those with the highest possible commitment level, ($M = 4.357$, $SD = 1.393$) had significantly rated their partners as more passive in the dating relationship than the less than perfect commitment group ($M = 3.351$, $SD = 0.978$), $t(18.077) = -2.481$, $p < 0.05$ (See Table 1 for a detailed analysis of responses to this question). This data is consistent with the hypothesis that predicted a link between traditional dating style and male commitment.

Common Values and Beliefs

An independent samples t-test compared the "perfect commitment" group to all those that had less than perfect levels on the dependent variable of couples shared values and beliefs. The perfect commitment group ($M = 4.86$, $SD = 0.363$) had significantly rated their partners as having more values and beliefs in common than the less than perfect commitment group ($M =$

4.135, SD = 0.887), $t(48.567) = -4.122$, $p < 0.05$ (See Table 2 for a detailed analysis of responses to this question). This data is consistent with the hypothesis that predicted a link between reward theory and male commitment.

Establishment of Sexual Boundaries

An independent samples t-test compared the “perfect commitment” group to all those that had less than perfect levels on the dependent variable on the independent variable of sexual boundary establishment. The perfect commitment group ($M = 4.57$, $SD = 0.852$) were more likely to agree to the statement “my partner and I have established sexual boundaries” than those in the less than perfect commitment group ($M = 4.000$, $SD = 1.054$), $t(28.929) = -2.998$, $p = .0505$ (See Table 3 for a detailed analysis of this question). This data is also consistent with the hypothesis that predicted a link between traditional dating style and male commitment.

Implications of Results

While the traditional/contemporary dating scale could not be used in its entirety, two questions were able to provide some insight into my original hypothesis. These questions inquired of female passivity and the establishment of sexual boundaries. Males in the perfect commitment group (had the highest commitment level possible) significantly reported that their partners played a more passive role and that the couple had established sexual boundaries. Female passivity and sexual boundaries are both elements of traditional dating as women are not supposed to pursue the relationship and couples are expected to make sexual boundaries. While this study cannot fully support that traditional dating predicts male commitment, this study can state that these two traditional dating style elements are associated with high levels of male commitment.

This study also found a correlation between an element of reward theory and male commitment. Males in the perfect commitment group significantly rated that their partners had similar beliefs and values more than the males without the highest level of commitment.

Discussion

As many dating scripts have disappeared in our postmodern age, men and women are left wondering how to approach a relationship. This research intended to solve some of this confusion by searching for a link between traditional dating approaches and male commitment. While this study could not find a link between traditional dating and male commitment, two aspects of traditional dating were associated with higher commitment levels. These two aspects included female passivity during the initial dating phase and the establishment of sexual boundaries. Surprisingly, female passivity was more associated with male commitment than even the length of dating relationship.

In addition, no correlations were found between contemporary dating approaches and male commitment. For example, a low score on Section I: question 1 (measuring which partner was assertive in the relationship) would have indicated a more active male role and therefore a more contemporary style of dating; however this low score was not associated with high scores on the commitment scale. Additionally, males answered Section I: question 7 the most contemporary of the set of questions assessing dating style. Despite the high contemporary dating score for this question, this score was not linked to a high level of commitment. Therefore behavior theory's implications on contemporary dating were not found to be predictive of male commitment in this survey. For reward theory outside of dating style, similar beliefs and values were linked to male commitment.

The results suggest that there may be an association between traditional dating style and male commitment but further research would have to confirm this with a well constructed scale of traditional/contemporary dating style. A major shortcoming of this study was the low internal consistency of this scale. To improve internal consistency future research should ask multiple questions on the different aspects present in dating. For example, future surveys could have several questions assessing the couple's attitude towards sexual behavior before marriage. Future studies should also increase clarity of question wording and include a more variable population for survey administration. For example, the population used narrowly consisted of males from a conservative Christian university. Future studies could improve reliability by testing the survey on both genders, and a variety of backgrounds, religious and political views, and ages (Aiken & Groth-Marnat, 2006).

Future research may also consider the other two sides of Sternberg's Triangle, intimacy and passion. Cognitive dissonance research may support that dating style, particularly male effort, would be associated with these other two love components.

Since this data was collected at a conservative Christian university, an additional shortcoming of this experiment involves generalizability. One could argue that more traditional relationships are encouraged and prized on this campus and therefore may result in more male commitment for that reason. Students at state schools may value more contemporary relationships and that may have further implications for male commitment as well. Furthermore, long-term relationships are typically prized at Christian schools (as seen by our high average of commitment scores). Therefore conservative Christian males may value both traditional dating styles, particularly reserving sexual activity for marriage, and long-term commitment. Future researchers could see if similar results were replicated at other schools.

This study was also narrowly focused on male rather than female commitment. Using the same theory of effort justification, it is possible that traditional dating would have the opposite effect on females' commitment level as they exert less effort in the initial relationship. Future research could find the implications of both traditional and contemporary dating styles on female commitment levels.

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Tables

Table 1

Students by Grade Level

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid Freshman	11	19.3	27.5	27.5
Sophomore	5	8.8	12.5	40.0
Junior	13	22.8	32.5	72.5
Senior	11	19.3	27.5	100.0
Total	40	70.2	100.0	
Missing	17	29.8		
Total	57	100.0		

Table 2

Relationship Demographics

	Traveling Distance (minutes)	Duration since first meeting partner (months)	Duration of Dating (months)
N Valid	54	53	53
Missing	3	4	4
Mean	98.5926	47.0943	19.1321
Median	25.0000	30.0000	14.0000
Mode	5.00	18.00 ^a	2.00 ^a
Std. Deviation	146.93812	50.13991	16.13887
Range	750.00	202.00	69.00
Minimum	.00	2.00	1.00
Maximum	750.00	204.00	70.00

a. Multiple modes exist. The smallest value is shown

Table 3

Section I and II Response Codes

Point Value	Section I	Section II
1.00	“Primarily my partner”	“Strongly Disagree”
2.00	“Mostly my partner”	“Disagree”
3.00	“Equally my partner and I”	“Neutral or unsure”
4.00	“More often me”	“Agree”
5.00	“Primarily myself”	“Strongly agree”
6.00	“Not Applicable”	N/A

Table 4

Section 1: Question 2

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid 1.00	1	1.8	1.8	1.8
2.00	8	14.0	14.0	15.8
3.00	20	35.1	35.1	50.9
4.00	19	33.3	33.3	84.2
5.00	2	3.5	3.5	87.7
6.00	7	12.3	12.3	100.0
Total	57	100.0	100.0	

Table 5

Section II: Question 6

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid 2.00	4	7.0	7.0	7.0
3.00	3	5.3	5.3	12.3
4.00	21	36.8	36.8	49.1
5.00	29	50.9	50.9	100.0
Total	57	100.0	100.0	

Table 6

Section II: Question 8

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	1.00	1	1.8	1.8	1.8
	2.00	4	7.0	7.0	8.8
	3.00	5	8.8	8.8	17.5
	4.00	19	33.3	33.3	50.9
	5.00	28	49.1	49.1	100.0
	Total	57	100.0	100.0	

Appendix

Section I: Please answer questions 1-10 based on your dating relationship with your partner before you became an official couple and use the following scale to rate the role each of you played in dating.

	Primarily my partner	More often my partner	Equally my partner and I	More often me	Primarily Myself	Not Applicable
1) Assertive and in control of relationship						
2) Passive in relationship						
3) Initiating conversation during dating						
4) Pursuing and planning dates/time together						
5) Providing transportation to dates/time together						
6) Giving gifts						
7) Gaining affection from the other						
8) Gaining trust from the other						
9) Spending time to get to know partner's close friends and family						
10) Establishing sexual boundaries						
11) Adjusting one's behavior to meet the needs of the other						

Section II: Please answer the following questions according to your current committed and official relationship. Use the following scale to rate each item.

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral or Unsure	Agree	Strongly Agree
1) My partner and I live close enough to see each other often.					
2) My partner has many skills and talents.					
3) Others consider my partner to be attractive.					
4) My partner and I enjoy the same activities.					
5) My partner and I have the same interests.					
6) My partner and I have the same values and beliefs.					
7) My partner is as interested in me as I am interested in them.					

8) My partner and I have established sexual boundaries.					
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	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral or unsure	Agree	Strongly Agree
9) My partner and I have decided to reserve sexual activity for marriage.					
10) My partner and I have considered or are living together.					
11) I know I care about my partner.					
12) I am committed to maintain my relationship with my partner.					
13) Because of my commitment to my partner, I will not let other people come between us.					
14) I have confidence in the stability of my relationship with my partner.					
15) I could not let anything get in the way of my commitment to my partner.					
16) I expect my love for my partner to last the rest of my life.					
17) I will always have a strong responsibility towards my partner.					
18) I view my commitment to my partner as a sold one.					
19) I cannot imagine ending my relationship with my partner.					
20) I am certain of my love for my partner.					
21) I view my relationship with my partner as permanent.					
22) I view my relationship with my partner a good decision.					
23) I feel a sense of responsibility towards my partner.					
24) I plan to continue my relationship with my partner.					
25) Even when my partner is hard to deal with, I remain committed to our relationship.					

Section III: Please answer these additional questions.

1. My partner and I live approximately ___ hours and ___ minutes from one other. (Determine the distance based on where you reside the majority of the year.)
2. I have known my partner for ___ years and ___ months.

3. I have been dating my partner for ____ years and ____ months.
4. I am a: Freshman Sophomore Junior Senior