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Dating on the Net: Teens and the Rise of "Pure" Relationships

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At the end of the 16th century, Marianne Dashwood, the fictional teenaged character in Jane Austen's novel *Sense and Sensibility*, committed an impropriety of great consequence to her own reputation: She wrote letters conveying her affection to John Willoughby, despite the fact that they were not engaged to be married (Austen, 1795/1989). Teenaged males and females, at least of the class and stature of which Austen wrote in the 18th century, did not interact except in suitably supervised situations or within the bounds of engagement to be married. Times certainly have changed.

Using qualitative interviews, participant observation, and teen-led focus groups, this chapter explores the emergent practice of teenage dating on the Internet. I consider these practices in the context of dating patterns throughout this century to develop an understanding of the possible cultural significance of the current practice. Net relationships provide many routes to emotional satisfaction among their participants, and Internet dating affords teen girls in particular the opportunity to

experiment with and claim power within heterosexual relationships. Yet, are the resultant relationships more emancipatory than those found in the "real-life" experiences of teens as a result? Are new teen communities constituted as these seemingly egalitarian relationships are formed? And by extension, do these Net relationships foster change in the lived social relations of the teens' local context? I argue here that the practice of Internet dating shares many characteristics with the "pure" relationship, Anthony Giddens's (1991) term for those relationships, characteristic of modernity, which are engaged in primarily for the gratifications they offer through interpersonal intimacy. Internet dating provides an illustration of the "pure" relationship in its contemporary form. Yet Internet dating relationships among teens also challenge Giddens's analysis, suggesting that our cultural understandings of the nature of relationships, and how they are evaluated in relation to issues of trust, commitment, and longevity, may be changing in subtle and not fully emancipatory ways.

Studying Teens and the Internet

This study on dating and the Internet emerged out of a broader qualitative study on the role of media technologies in the domestic context of the household.¹ Over the course of a year, I conducted a series of interviews and observations with 15 families and two focus groups, devoting between 4 and much more than 30 hours of conversation, observation, or both to each family. A total of 47 teens and 26 of their family members were included in the interviews, groups, and observations. An additional six families (14 teens) were interviewed by an associate researcher on the project, who has corroborated my findings.

From the families interviewed, three teenagers were selected for the further study of Internet use: Elizabeth, a 15-year-old white female from a lower-income single parent household; Jake, a 17-year-old white male from a middle-income blended (two-parent, second marriage) household; and Michael, a 15-year-old African American male from a lower-income single parent household. These individuals were chosen because they represented "information-rich cases," in that I expected that they would yield findings that would contrast from expectations and from each other due to their differing social, economic, and political positions within the wider culture (Yin, 1994, pp. 45-46). As one example, Elizabeth, whose family is on a very limited income and is of course

female, has been very active in on-line chat rooms, whereas Jake, the middle-class male in a well-educated family, has been the least active. Michael falls somewhere in between in chat room use, but he is noteworthy as an underprivileged youth who has developed competence in Web design through opportunities in a community center and through his own initiative. I also selected them for their ability to be thoughtful, articulate, and responsible, as I wanted to train them to serve as leaders of what I have called *peer-led discussion groups*, focus groups that were led and participated in solely by teens. This format was adopted as a means to more closely observe how teenagers "really" talk about these issues when an adult is not present. The method follows the suggestion of qualitative methodology expert Elizabeth Bird (personal communication, 1995). In addition to training each of the teens to serve as a discussion group leader, I also worked with each of them to modify an interview guide I had constructed, making it appropriate and comfortable for each leader. Each of these teens recruited six friends of the same gender to participate in their discussion group, which the leader arranged, conducted, and tape recorded. Once the group had met, I transcribed the audiotapes and then met with the leaders once again to discuss the process and their responses to it. They listened to the tapes and checked to be sure that the statements were properly attributed. They also provided information about the group's dynamics, giving me insight into why some individuals may have answered (or declined to answer) as they did.²

Whereas my research primarily is based on these interviews and observations in "real life," I supplemented the knowledge gained through these methods by "lurking" in teen chat rooms. Elizabeth also allowed me to read many of the e-mail exchanges she had had with her on-line male friends.

Although many of the teens discussed using the Net for school-related research, the teens in my study primarily used the Net to communicate with other young people in the teen chat rooms of Microsoft Network, America Online, and the teen lobby of Yahoo! These "socially produced spaces" constitute a form of "synchronistic communication," in that the posts are ephemeral and immediate (Baym, 1995; Jones, 1995). They are seen by all those in the chat room at the same time, and answers to various queries posted to the chat room often overlap, creating a cacophony of conversation. Most of the teens with whom I spoke had experienced similar periods of intense experimentation in the chat rooms, sometimes devoting more than 4 hours a day to on-line chats for

a period of several weeks or even months. In most cases, however, this period was followed by parent sanctioning, which either severely limited or discontinued the teen's chat room participation altogether. Despite the frequent warnings concerning the dangers facing teens on the Internet, parents were largely unaware of the content of the chat rooms; the limits were set based on what in some cases were alarmingly high bills from their service providers.³

Much like the adults on the Net discussed by Rheingold (1991) and others, teens seemed to be drawn to Internet chat rooms by the promise of fantasy and fun. As Kramarae (1995) noted in her critique of the overwhelmingly male population in cyberspace, the males far outnumbered the females in teen chat rooms as well. Yet there were also differences between the communications between teens and those I witnessed on the adult chat lines. Perhaps most obvious was the "age and sex check," the frequent request that resulted in the sharing of ages and genders among participants, often serving as a precursor for those of similar ages to break off into a separate chat room of only two persons, which the girls, at least, agreed constituted an "Internet 'date'" (the boys were less comfortable with the term "dating" to describe the interaction between males and females on the Net, as I will discuss more fully at a later point). As Elizabeth explained:

What would usually happen is that we would meet for the first time in a chat room, and then if I decide I want to talk to them more personally, I would get a chat room for only like two or three people, so we wouldn't get people coming in and out all the time. And we'd talk for a little while, until one of us had to leave or something. We'd exchange e-mail addresses, and we'd like write every once in a while. And like, we could get together at a certain time. I'd say, "I'm gonna be on the 'Net' at this time, if you can meet me at this chat room at this time, then I'll see you there." And if they can't, then that's okay.

Sometimes these initial conversations between two teens would last for several hours. The topics of conversation mirrored those one might hear at a teen party. Internet dating, much like the practice's counterpart in "real life," exists within a specific environment that in many ways, not surprisingly, shares similarities with the other social contexts in which teens find themselves. Thus, we turn to a discussion of the environment of teen chat rooms within which (or out of which) Internet dating occurs, beginning with a review of the practice in its historical context.

Teenagers and Dating: A Brief History

Teenage "dating"—the casual romantic interactions between males and females (or, even more recently, between persons of the same gender)—is a relatively recent phenomenon. Historians argue that it emerged among middle-class teens in the 1920s during a time of gender role upheaval (Bailey, 1988). With the rise of both compulsory education and restrictive child labor laws during this era, teens of immigrant and farm families who once had been expected to work, as well as teens from more privileged classes, were now sent to school. Education was cemented into the American teen experience, affording increased public opportunities for young people to interact with one another under minimal supervision by their parents.

The rise of the "dance craze" in the 1920s also has been linked to the emergence of the practice of "dating" (Modell, 1989). Whereas some teens in the decade before had attended community dances that were sponsored by neighborhoods or other social clubs (and hence had fairly strict social restraints that limited the "tendency to overstep moral rules"), it was the opening of a dance "palace" in New York City in 1911 that ushered in new practices surrounding dancing and dating (Modell, 1989, p. 71). The large dance halls that subsequently sprang up in urban areas made dancing with relative strangers an accessible and intriguing new option for teens. The dance style of the period, as it moved away from formal steps and toward increased free expression and physical contact, encouraged the establishment of casual heterosexual relationships in a way not previously seen.

During the same era, film houses multiplied throughout urban as well as rural areas, and weekly attendance at motion pictures increased dramatically. The darkened theater and the heightened emotions film evoked offered further opportunities for physical closeness. Whereas films often were attended by groups of teens, they quickly became vehicles for the exploration of exclusive intergender relations as well (Blumer, 1933).

Modell (1989) credited middle-class girls of this era with actually initiating the practice of dating, as they had the most to gain from the establishment of the practice. He wrote, "Before dating, parents had tended to construe strictly girls' obligation to enter marriage untainted by even a hint of scandal, and they supervised courting accordingly, limiting both its occasion and the set of eligibles." As parents were more

concerned with their daughters' reputations than their sons', "girls were far more constrained by parental oversight" (Modell, 1989, p. 95). Whereas dating in the early part of the century still required the male to take initiative, it shifted control over the girls' interactions—and by extension, her sexuality—from her parents to her peers. It thus served as a potent aspect of youth rebellion against parents and their traditional ways. Whereas girls of this generation would not be considered sexually liberated by today's standards, dating enabled girls to play a more active role in constructing and maintaining heterosexual interaction through informal rules of conduct. Dating required teen boys to negotiate with teen girls and their peers directly, rather than through their families. To a significant extent, dating shifted the approval and sanctioning of romantic relationships from parents to peers.

Dating then, as now, consisted of going to movies, dances, or restaurants. As such, dating, and by extension romance, quickly came to be linked with leisure and consumption, as Illouz argued (Illouz, 1997). Moreover, as the rising consumerism of this era encouraged immediate gratification, young people began to think of self-denial for its own sake as old-fashioned, seeking in dancing and dating some fulfillment of the sexual tensions of adolescence (Fass, 1977). Whereas chaperoning and "calling" were steadily replaced among middle-class teens by the practice of dating, however, those teens of all races with less means were less likely to date. Part of this is due to the fact that these teens were usually encouraged to lighten the family's financial obligations either by seeking employment or marrying. By the middle of the century, however, in part due to the popular romanticized narratives of the practice in film, television, and magazines, "dating" became an integral part of the teen experience in the United States.

Since the cultural shifts and sexual revolutions of the 1960s, however, dating as a teenage institution has been in decline. Ironically, as Modell (1989) pointed out, dating, which originally caught on as a form of rebellion from establishment and traditional values, "had moved from a 'thrill'-based innovation half a century before to a somewhat fading bastion of essentially 'traditional' marriage values" by the 1960s (p. 303). Today, teens use the term "dating" in a somewhat bemused way, often with self-conscious ironic reference to the 1950s version of the practice. Whereas they still go out on dates, these occasions are less fraught with specific expectations. They are less frequently planned in advance, for example, and there is also less compulsion to report on the experience to

one's peers. "Dating" has become much more idiosyncratic, with less reference to the external peer group and more relation to the self-gratifications and pleasures of the individuals involved. This is part of a larger turn toward issues of self-reflexivity and identity as central aspects of relationships, as I will show.

Cyberdating Relationship as Emancipatory

Cyberdating's potential to limit emotional pain in relationships seems particularly appealing for teen girls. Indeed, the girls in my study were, on the whole, much more enthusiastic about the possibilities afforded to Net dating than the boys of the same age. "I'm not too popular with the guys," 15-year-old Elizabeth explained to me, noting that Net relationships held less potential for the pain of rejection. On the Internet, employing her excellent skills in verbal articulation and humor, she seemed to have no difficulty meeting and developing relationships with boys and was even "dating four guys at once." "Usually I act a lot more aggressive when I'm on the Internet," she stated. "I just express my feelings a lot more in the chat rooms and stuff, so if somebody talks about something that I don't like, then I'll say it. And I would probably never do that in class, in school and everything." As Reid has written of the Net experience in general, "Users are able to express and experiment with aspects of their personality that social inhibition would generally encourage them to suppress" (Reid, 1991, cited in Baym, 1995, p. 143). This suggests that girls may use the verbal skills they might otherwise suppress to parlay themselves into a stronger position in relationship to their male counterparts, thereby assuming more authority in the construction of the heterosexual relationship. This was illustrated in one of the peer-led discussion group's conversations about sexual behaviors on the Net:

- Elizabeth: The only thing I didn't like about those guys [two "brothers" she was dating simultaneously] was that they liked sex just a little bit too much.
- Vickie: Cybersex?
- Lisa: Kinky?
- Elizabeth: They liked sex, it was scary. They e-mailed me a message that like, had a lot to do with sex, and you know, we

didn't—I didn't have my own screen name or e-mail address, so it was like, oh my God! [Either her mother or brother, who share her account, could have read it] So I like deleted it before I even read it. And when I was talking with them later, they're all, "did you get my message?" And I'm all, "uh, no. Yes, I did, but I didn't have a chance to read it. My brother tried to read it, so I deleted it before I could read it, I'm sorry." Yeah—right! [the girls all laugh]. But you know I never even told those guys I was getting off the Internet when I did. So I just kinda like, disappeared.

- Betsi: How long do you think they were talking, thinking you were there?
- Vickie: They're like, sitting there writing all these messages to you, and you're gone.
- Elizabeth: Well, I got off the Internet, my mom canceled the thing [the AOL account], and I never told them that I was gonna cancel.

In this situation, unwanted sexual advances were not only rebuffed but resulted in Elizabeth's creation of a potentially embarrassing situation for the boys as they may have found themselves talking (or masturbating?) without an audience. Further, the boys were objectified as the story became a shared experience of female triumph among the girlfriends.

To further strengthen their position in the dating interaction, several teen girls reported that they adopt new physical personae, describing their looks in such a way as to appear more attractive to the males. This not only fulfills the function of avoiding potential pain and rejection but also neutralizes some of the power aspects of the heterosexist system in which beautiful girls are given more attention and more social opportunities (Brown & Gilligan, 1992). If everyone constructs their appearance in accord with the imagined "ideal," after all, no one can be judged more or less desirable based solely on appearances. Thus in effect, boys lose some of their power as one of the primary tools of the evaluation of desirability is removed from the equation. It would appear that in these relationships, it is no longer wholly a matter of the men as consumers and women as consumed, as has been argued in less interactive contexts (see, e.g., Kramarae, 1995). Girls feel empowered through the power of self-presentation.

Interestingly, both Michael and Jake state that they dislike it when girls lie about their looks in the chat rooms. As Jake said,

- Jake: You can kinda like tell [if they're lying, because of] how they're putting it and all. Sometimes they get too extreme with their lying. You're like, "whatever."
- Interviewer: So that's kind of a turnoff, then, when you can tell that they're lying?
- Jake: Yeah. "Bye." And then go back into the chat room.

Michael noted that looks are less important on the Net than they are in real life.

- Interviewer: So what is the difference, do you think, between meeting someone in the chat room and dating somebody in person?
- Michael: Well, when you're dating somebody and it seems like, you're more looking at them, but when you're like, chatting to them, you can't see them, but you can get that trust going with the person, and you can really get to know them before you see them. And if you know 'em before you see them, you'll like, even if they don't look physically attractive to you, you'll still like them because you know them and you have a lot in common.

When he learned that one of the girls with whom he was chatting had lied about her looks, Michael noted that he did not abandon the relationship because he had not entered it with romantic intent based on looks:

- Michael: Okay, I ask them [girls he's met in chat rooms] to describe themselves, and some of them, they lie. Like one girl, she said she was 5'5," 130 some pounds, I forgot, and I went on her Web page, and she was pretty big. [laughs.] So I asked her why she lied, she was like, "I was scared you wouldn't like me." But I talk to her still, though . . .
- Interviewer: Have you ever, when people have said what they looked like, decided that you didn't like them?
- Michael: No. Mostly, when I go on the Web, I'm looking for friends, so it really doesn't matter what they look like.

Thus, even though boys may dislike the changing of looks, they are still able to find on-line relationships with girls satisfying. Instead of being

under pressure by their peers to pair with the "right" girls whose looks approximate the ideal, the Internet allows for more egalitarian exchange freed from most of the restraint of peer approval. Indeed, several of the teens noted that what begins as somewhat romantic or titillating Internet exchanges often grows into positive, ongoing relationships with members of the opposite sex. This suggests some hope for the Net's ability to contribute to positive teen communities both in cyberspace and beyond. Also, because physical contact is (usually) impossible in a Net relationship, young people may find that they are able to communicate with one another free from the social and peer pressures toward expressed sexuality.

Yet, whereas this might suggest a depth of relationship is possible, my research actually affirmed that the opposite is much more common. This is not surprising, as the environment of teen chat rooms in many ways mirrors the social restraints teens experience in "real life." For example, let us return to the consideration of the fact that girls change their appearances to achieve more social power. In this action, teen girls are not redefining standards of acceptability based on beauty but are using the Net to actively construct what they believe is a more socially acceptable version of themselves. Each of the teen discussion groups expressed agreement in the fact that "on the Internet, they [persons of the opposite sex] cannot see you." Whereas the lack of physical presence undoubtedly lowers inhibitions as Kiesler and colleagues argued, the fact that each group mentioned this when contrasting dating on the Internet to dating in "real life" demonstrates the importance of visual appearance in the currency of popularity and hence one's desirability as a "date" (Kiesler, Siegel, & McGuire, 1984). Not surprisingly, given the opportunities afforded on the Net, girls are very conscious of the on-line presentations of themselves. Elizabeth notes, for example, "Usually I describe myself skinnier or taller. Skinnier and taller, with longer hair, and a lighter color blond, usually." In this way, Elizabeth's employment of the technology is in keeping with social conventions concerning gender roles. She was not interested in meeting the boys with whom she conversed, as this might undermine her attractive and aggressive on-line persona. In fact, when one of the male friends suggested that they talk on the phone, she deliberately kept her phone line busy during the appointed time so that he would not be able to get through. She said that they did not "talk" again on-line after that, something she seemed to have no regrets about, even though she reported that the relationship had been fairly intimate before that time. She also noted that although

she had never "met" anyone on-line from her own school, she had decided to terminate one relationship owing to the fact that the boy attended a neighboring school:

We started comparing notes about who we knew in each others' schools. But I didn't want to meet him, or someone from my own school, because then what if I knew who he was in person and he said something mean about me, I'd be like, hurt.

"Dates" with faceless and voiceless boys from faraway places held no such possible consequences. The fact that Elizabeth avoided rejection in "real" relationships and still sensed a need to censure her ideas when not on-line further demonstrates that the power afforded through self-construction on the Net does not translate into changed gender roles and expectations in the social world beyond cyberspace. Consistent with the findings of Rakow and Navarro in their study of the introduction of cellular phones, therefore, we must conclude that the possibility that new communication technologies might subvert social systems is limited (Rakow & Navarro, 1993; see also Rakow, 1988). Indeed, there is evidence of much more that is socially reproduced into the chat rooms from the environment of "real life."

Border Patrol: The Policing of Gender and Taboo Relationships

The content of teen chat rooms on the whole appears to be much tamer than many of the adult chat rooms.⁴ Whereas adults are explicit about their desires, as Seabrook (1997) has illustrated, teens are much more reserved and, not surprisingly, less creative verbally. Much like the furtive illicit activities of the proverbial backseat, teens were reluctant to speak of their sexual experimentation, and what happened in the "private" two-person chat sessions was not up for discussion in the more public chat rooms.

Sex was an exciting but also heavily policed topic in the teen chat rooms. On several occasions in teen chat rooms, in fact, persons who issued explicit invitations for cybersex were sanctioned through prolonged "silences" (in which the on-screen dialogue was halted) followed by statements such as, "Whoa" or even "watch the language." There were also comments of mockery directed at the overzealous pursuer,

such as the comment following an age and sex check: "ha ha RYAN, all 2 young 4 you!" On the whole, the teens seemed much less comfortable expressing their sexual desires and fantasies in the larger group of a teen chat room than the adults did in their counterpart rooms, although there were suggestive screen names adopted by the teens, such as "Tigerlover," or the more explicit "Rydh69her."

Just as in "real life," teens in chat rooms seem to be more vocal than their adult counterparts in policing the boundaries of race and sex. In the following exchange, a racist remark was "policed" by calling on homophobic language, thus substituting gender for race in the goal of "policing" what is "normal":

- Rydher69er: What the fuck was up with that racist remark earlier
- Rydher69er: That was gay ass shit!!!!!!
- Kandii1998: 17/f/cali
- UziKlown: gay, eh?
- UziKlown: Are you saying you like gay ass?
- Brocky8638: Right back where I started
- UziKlown: or just "gay ass shit"?
- Hhoneycutt: Nahh, I ain't racist
- UziKlown: Pretty messed up, I say

This exchange illustrates another difference between adult and teen chat rooms: Teens are more overtly critical of homosexuality and use derogatory terms to police the boundaries of heterosexuality and to place themselves safely within its realm. In his analysis of the heterosexist culture of adolescent schooling, Friend (1993) has observed, "a systematic set of institutional and cultural arrangements exist that reward and privilege people for being or appearing to be heterosexual, and establish potential punishments or lack of privilege for being or appearing to be homosexual" (p. 210). Friend pointed to textbooks that assume a heterosexual norm and teachers reluctant to discuss homosexuality altogether as ways in which heterosexism is reinforced through silencing. Heterosexist ideas extend beyond the classroom to the adolescents' homes and are reinforced in the media through texts that assume the norm of heterosexuality. Being labeled a homosexual or lesbian by one's peers, regardless of the reason, then, has real material consequences: Loss of friendships, marginaliza-

tion, and physical violence may result. Thus teens, both heterosexual and homosexual, have a great investment in maintaining a "straight" identity in the context of public schools and constantly seek to assert their heterosexuality. Teen chat rooms, along with other locations in which teen discussions occur, serve as platforms on which young people may assert their alignment with the dominant ideology of heterosexuality as a means of affirming that they are accepted and acceptable among their peers. One can therefore imagine the therapeutic and liberating potential of gay and lesbian teen chat rooms for young persons. I have not analyzed these chat rooms here because among the teens in my study, experiences in these locations were not discussed except in instances in which the speaker was asserting his or her own heterosexuality. For instance, mention of gay and lesbian chat rooms surfaced in the discussion groups when the peer leaders asked them, "which is the worst chat room to meet boys or girls?" In each group someone answered, "The gay [or lesbian] lounge," followed by raucous laughter.

In addition to overt sexual advances and the sanctioning of homosexuality, there were also at least three potential hazards of Internet communication that further illustrated the borders of acceptability in teen chat room communication. These involved gender confusion, mistaking a person in "real life" for an anonymous converser on the Net, and, for females, avoiding the potential adult male stalker. The first story came about when Elizabeth was asked, "Do you ever make friends with girls on-line?" She replied,

Yeah. A lot. Usually I'll post a BBS in some kind of folder, and it'll be like, "I'm new to the network. If you'd like to talk—" I'll like describe myself, what I like to do, and be like, "If you want to talk, then here's my address," and then I'll set up a time. And sometimes, most of the times, it was guys. 'Cause I think that's what a lot of people look for in relationships on the Internet. But sometimes I'd get a girl, and we'd talk about whatever. One time I was talking to this girl. . . . We both thought—I thought that she was a guy, and she thought that I was a guy. So we went in, and we started talking, and she goes, "Oh, I'm a model for *Teen* magazine." And I was like, "No way!" And she said, "Yeah, I'm gonna be in next month's." And I looked at it, and there was a girl on the front cover, and I was like, "Wait a minute!" So it got me weirded out, and I got back on the Internet, and I said, "Are you a girl?" And she said, "Yeah, is there a problem with that?" And I said, "Well, I'm a girl, too." She goes, "Oh, my gosh! I thought you were a guy!" So

sometimes you can get kind of confused if you don't specify who you are.

After this initial confusion, Elizabeth attempted to e-mail the girl again but noted that the "model" at first did not reply and then eventually explained that she did not have time to keep in touch with Elizabeth. The preferred method of communication on-line is apparently that of a heterosexual dyad, and while friendships between girls are permitted, the potential for misunderstanding motives makes them more risky owing to the fears of homosexuality noted above. The mistaken identity problem also extends to on-line communication between two people who believe that they do not know one another, but actually do, as in these two stories offered during the girls' discussion group:

- Vickie: My friend goes to school with this guy who she had had a crush on for like, years. Since 6th grade she's had a crush on this guy, and they've just been friends. One day she was on the Internet in a chat room, and she was sitting there talking and they were talking back, and all of a sudden—she has this thing about slinkies, and she gave her friend a slinky for good luck at his swim meet. And she's sitting there, they're talking, and he goes, "do you have a slinky?" She goes, "Matt?!" [uproarious laughter]
- Elizabeth: My cousin did that. He was talking on the Internet, it's like a small one, it's not all over the United States, it's just in Colorado or something, and she's talking to this guy. One thing led to another, and she asked if he likes "If They Were Giants." And he's like, "yeah," She goes, "Wow, my younger brother likes them, too." Turns out that she was talking to her younger brother on the Internet. She didn't even know! She's like, "Tristan?" [momentary silence]
- Lisa: How weird.
- Allyson: Weird.
- Betsi: That's odd.

The Internet offers risks, therefore, that not only hold the potential of threatening one's cyberspace identity but of invading and confusing "real-life" relationships, as well. But perhaps the most fearsome example of how Internet relationships might disrupt real life were discussed in terms of an Internet stalker. This shadowy figure emerged when the

leader asked, "What do your parents think about dating on the Internet? And if they don't know about it, what do you think they would think about it?"

- Allyson: No! Absolutely no! They won't let me date at all. They're mean, evil people.
- Betsi: My parents think it's gross.
- Lisa: They wouldn't care, they'd think it was weird. They'd be like, "Okay, if you think so." But . . .
- Elizabeth: My mom didn't have a problem with it, because she knew that I couldn't do anything with this guy. Specially since most of the guys I met were like . . .
- Allyson: But you don't know . . .
- Lisa: Yeah, I don't think my parents would . . .
- Betsi: Well, I mean—are you crazy??
- Allyson: Some of them can be really gross perverts, and they can find out where you live, and stuff, which is really quite dangerous.
- Elizabeth: Yeah. That's the only thing my mom's paranoid about. She's like, "don't give them your phone number. Don't give them your real name."
- Vickie: And don't give them your address.
- Elizabeth: And don't tell them even what state you live in. I always do it anyway. They're like, "where do you live?" I'm like, "Colorado." Big deal. [sarcastically] It's a big state, people, come on!
- Lisa: "Where do you live? I live in . . ."
- Allyson: I'm sure they're gonna go door-to-door and ask, "has anyone gone on the Internet with this name? You don't have a computer? Okay, next house!" [uproarious laughter]
- Betsi: [laughing] I'm sure!

In this situation, the potential stalker is not discussed within the context of what has happened to someone's friend (as was the case in the earlier example of border patrol) or to one of the girls themselves but in relation to what *could* happen. Whereas parents are clearly not involved in the teen chat rooms, their influence is felt in their ability to convincingly warn their

children of the potential dangers of the practice of dating on the Net. Yet, also in this instance, the teen chat room is affirmed as a place for those of their own age, as they discuss deflection of potential intruders while simultaneously assuming greater expertise over their environment than that displayed by their parents.

The norm of interaction in teen chat rooms, therefore, to extend the earlier argument, is of heterosexual dyads between two persons of the opposite sex and approximately the same age who did not know one another in other contexts. This of course echoes the norms of romantic interaction occurring in the high school. Yet chat room and follow-up e-mail experiences have afforded teen participants an opportunity to experiment with heterosexual relationships in ways that are rather different from, and in certain ways less risky than, those occurring in their junior high and high schools. Even with their limits in terms of overturning gendered hierarchies, therefore, these relationships suggest changes that are occurring in the adolescent interactions and expectations between males and females.

Dating and the "Pure Relationship" in a "Risk" Society

Much like the dance halls 70 years earlier, today's cyberculture affords teenagers new opportunities to experiment with gender relations, with results potentially as far-reaching as those initiated during that time period. I would like to suggest that the relationships on-line are characteristically different along both physical and emotional lines. The *physical* hazards of relationships, at least in terms of consensual premarital sex, were limited more than 30 years ago with the introduction of "the pill" and the consequent rise in acceptability of other forms of birth control to avoid pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases. It is almost too obvious to state that the Net introduces disembodied relations, thereby limiting physical contact between most teens. After all, even if they had wanted to meet their Net romance in person, the challenges of distance and a lack of transportation or resources limit this to a significant degree among teens. Net relationships, therefore, operate in tandem with or as verbal "practice" for the actual events in "real life" rather than eliminating or restructuring the sexual mores that preceded them. Yet in the contemporary situation, "Internet dating" emerges as an alluring option for intimate hetero- and homosexual experimentation that holds the

possibility of decreasing the potential *emotional* hazards of intimate relations.

Someone from an older generation might wonder why teens would feel that dating is an emotional minefield to be navigated carefully. After all, those older than teens might look back on the youthful dating scene as carefree. Yet dating, like other cultural institutions, must be considered in context. Borrowing the term from Ulrich Beck, Giddens referred to the current situation as a "risk society." (Beck, 1986, cited in Giddens, 1991). Giddens noted that this implies more than the increased exposure to new forms of danger:

To accept risk as risk, an orientation which is more or less forced on us by the abstract systems of modernity, is to acknowledge that no aspects of our activities follow a predestined course, and all are open to contingent happenings. . . . Living in the "risk society" means living with a calculative attitude to the open possibilities of action, positive and negative, with which, as individuals and globally, we are confronted in a continuous way in our contemporary social existence. (p. 28)

As a part of their developmental process, therefore, teens must garner the skills necessary to envision various possible outcomes to their actions. Even as this has occurred, the decline of the authority of adult institutions throughout culture in general has left young people with more autonomy and hence more authority over their own behavior. Moreover, with the rise of part-time employment hours, young people themselves now have greater control over resources (financial and educational) that allow them to choose the timing of the events in their own life course to a greater extent than in previous generations. This combination of factors results in a strikingly different approach to the future than the concept of one's "fate," which teens of earlier generations had been taught to accept, even if implicitly. Perhaps in the past teens felt that society held a specific place for them and their task was simply to find out what that was by undergoing an "identity crisis" of some kind, as Erickson (1968) postulated. Instead, with the rise of a plethora of potential courses of action, teens learn that they will, throughout their lives, continually be called on to choose between "possible worlds." They have witnessed their parents and other adults in their lives changing their minds about mates, careers, and home locations, after all. Teens therefore have come to expect that while intimate relationships may offer fulfill-

ment, such satisfaction may be ephemeral. Relationships are pursued as a part of a self-reflexive process in this context and may be understood in terms of what Giddens (1991) characterized as a "pure relationship":

[Pure relationships] offer the opportunity for the development of trust based on voluntary commitments and an intensified intimacy. Where achieved and relatively secure, such trust is psychologically stabilizing, because of the strong connections between basic trust and the reliability of the caretaking figures. (p. 186)

The "pure" relationship, therefore, is not necessarily constrained by the structures of social or economic life, although of course, one's life *choices* are greatly conditioned by one's life *chances* (the latter referring to the Weberian phrase in which work is acknowledged as an economic, and hence social, determinant of the lifestyle options one has). The "pure" relationship, Giddens argued, is justified not in reference to one's kinship or other social ties but in reference to romantic love. Indeed, it is considered "pure" because it is no longer constituted within the social context of kin and community. Persons are no longer constrained in their selection of romantic partners by the social mores of their families or communities. Instead, relationships are sought out and maintained solely for the gratifications they provide to the persons involved. Therefore, these relationships of modernity, Giddens argued, are always organized in relation to the reflexive self who asks, "how is this relationship fulfilling to *me*?" With the lowering of sexual inhibitions through the social transformations of the last four decades, sex has come to be more closely aligned with contemporary concepts of intimacy and even identity and thus is a key aspect of the "pure" relationship. This is illustrated in Modell's (1989) argument:

In the 1950s love had been defined in terms of meeting role expectations. Now it was "characterized by 'meeting the needs' of the other through interaction, commitment, affection, and non-possessiveness." Mutuality was no longer a theme of "coming together" in mystic sexual union but rather of each partner enhancing the other's happiness. Each couple represented a fresh negotiation of promising but uncertain potential that would endure while each partner gratified the openly pleasure-seeking *self* of the other. (p. 303)

Thus to some extent, by Giddens's definition at least, we would expect to find that sex among teens has been transformed from the externalized "thrill" of the 1950s "date" to something much more consensual, intimate, and important in the construction of self-identity. Selfhood, Giddens argued, emerges in relation to the negotiation of self-gratification in relationship.

Because the "pure" relationship is not anchored in anything beyond itself, Giddens argued, voluntary commitment plays a central role, and therefore the ability to trust the other becomes central to its continuance. Intimate communication that validates and develops the self, therefore, seems to be an integral goal of the "pure relationship" of which Giddens wrote. Conversely, therefore, I would argue that teens—much like adults—seek to avoid emotional risk because they see it as a potential threat to the self. Some of the teens and their parents with whom I spoke noticed this tendency among teens to avoid emotional investment. One parent contrasted this with her own generation's proclivity to seek "deep" relationships:

- Mother: My kids, this generation, they're very surface. They don't get deep.
- Michael (15 years old): See, we're mellow.
- Mother: Back in the '60s, everybody got real deep. Even though they were into the free love and all that, they got into it real deeply. But this generation is more of, "don't make me go that far down into the situation."
- Interviewer (to the teens in the family): Do you think that's true?
- Paula (19 years old): I think that's true, and I think that's because of the way things are now. I feel that even with me, and a lot of my friends, there's so much violence, it's like, I don't know anybody that hasn't lost a good friend or brother or cousin or whatever to violence, so it's like, we don't try to get real deep in stuff. Everything's like, "whatever." If something happens it's like, "I don't care."
- Michael: And like, when a movie that comes out like that's all silliness, it kinda lets you escape from all the seriousness and stuff like that.
- Paula: But even most serious movies, that are supposed to be real violent, my mom gets mad at us, 'cause she gets all senti-

mental about it, "oh, it's so terrible," and we're all like laughing at her. She always says we're morbid. And I'm like, well, you can't really get that into it, 'cause with the everyday thing, you'll just go crazy. You gotta kinda go with the flow.

— Interviewer: So, is there something that gives you hope that things will be different sometime?

— Paula: I don't know. [chuckles] Well.

— Michael: Well, hope's just one day at a time.

In this exchange, the older teen explains the motivation for the avoidance of emotional risk, or "depth" in relationships, in terms of violence and the potential for loss. In fact, there is so much loss in "the everyday thing" for her that she explains her own desensitization to media portrayals of violence as a part of her position of self-defense. In doing so, she demonstrates the way in which self-construction and self-preservation play an important role in determining personal relationships and in "reading" the cultural and mediated texts of relationships, as well. Thus dating as a social practice must be seen within this wider cultural reality in which risk to oneself, and the seeking of intimacy that validates the self, have become important aspects of teen discourse on relationships.

This would imply that the character of the relationships formed on-line may be quite different from those of the past owing to fundamental shifts in how individuals relate to one another along the axis of intimacy. Of course, there is the obvious difference of a lack of physical sexual intimacy as an aspect of the on-line form of the "pure" relationship. As noted earlier, one could imagine that such relationships might be more egalitarian as the restraints of power issues in sexual relations between males and females are bypassed. Teen chat room relationships therefore would be expected to favor intimacy that is achieved through conversation and self-revelation, which were important aspects of Giddens's (1991) "pure" relationship, as noted here:

The "pure" relationship depends on mutual trust between partners, which in turn is closely related to the achievement of intimacy. . . . To build up trust, an individual must be both trusting and trustworthy. . . . What matters in the building of trust in the pure relationship is that each person should know the other's personality, and be able to rely on regularly eliciting certain sorts of desired responses from the other. This is one

reason (not the only one) why authenticity has such an important place in self-actualization. (p. 186)

Giddens suggested that trust and "authenticity," or truthful and open self-revelation, are central to self-gratifying relations.

In contrast, trust and "authenticity" are *not* central to teen chat room relationships; "fun" is. In fact, one important aspect of the "fun" is in working within the "mysterious" element, as Jake terms it, of not knowing the other person in the on-line relationship at all. As Jake noted, "It's pretty fun. 'Cause it's like, you don't really care, 'cause they don't know who you are, you don't know who they are. It doesn't matter, you're just talking about all this stuff." Michael concurred, as did Elizabeth, who noted,

You can be whoever you want to be, and the guys can be whatever they want to be. So it might not necessarily be an *hottest* relationship, but it's fun. Because you don't get really serious, because, obviously you couldn't easily get involved with a guy on the Internet [when compared with one] you could actually talk to and see. So I think it's just for fun.

These relationships, therefore, are constantly renegotiated between honesty and dishonesty, even as they evolve over time. Dishonesty, as Michael noted earlier, is not sufficient reason to discontinue the relationship. Is this solely because teens are less invested in these relationships? In part, of course, that is true. But I would also suggest that the type of relationship pursued by teens on the Net is perhaps best understood as an extension of the "pure" relationship, regardless of whether or not its content is perceived as primarily one of romance or of friendship by its participants. In fact, these teens suggest that even these distinctions are less important on the Net than they may be in other contexts. This is due to the fact that the function of the relationship has shifted even further toward the affirmation of self, its gratifications resting in its ability to provide opportunities for self-reflexivity and even self-consciously imagined (or constructed) intimacy. The other person is important to this project but obviously to a much lesser extent than in the "pure" relationship described by Giddens. Whereas the on-line relations are connected to the lived experiences of the participants through the social contexts and mores in which the individuals are situated on a local level, there are even fewer possibilities for social constraints in these on-line relations. The peers of those who participate in Internet dating only know what their

friends choose to reveal about these relations. The participants in the relations experience a satisfaction in relationships that have no reference to their peer group or social status and may be considered more individualistic as a result. Moreover, it is not a complete lack of commitment but a tenuous and ephemeral commitment that links the participants in the Internet date and provides satisfaction for its participants. In this context, it is perhaps not surprising that it does not matter whether or not the participant in the relationship is accessible in "real life," and why in some cases such connection is studiously avoided, as was illustrated in Elizabeth's avoidance of the male Net friend who wanted to speak with her on the telephone. The lack of accessibility fulfills a function in keeping such individualized expressions of intimacy and self-gratification from impinging on one's local, lived experience. In essence, the relationship has many of the benefits of the "pure" relationship but without the restraints of a commitment of time or emotional resources. In this sense it might be said to be a postmodern "pure" relationship: one comprised of self-reflexivity in which experimentation and self-construction are central. Unlike adult participants in chat rooms, teens are limited in their ability to parlay an emotional tie forged on the Net into something that would have material consequences in the local context. Thus, the relationships that emerge transcend time and space to deliver satisfaction through the medium of a disembodied, "surface" communication, allowing the teen to feel connected to others while allowing them to experience affirmation in an environment that does not risk their current social position.

Conclusion

What, then, might be the implications for a teen community on the Internet in this environment? I have argued that whereas teen dating relationships in chat rooms mirror the relationships of "real life" in their adherence to norms of heterosexism and sexism, we also see a difference in the role of trust and intimacy in these relations when compared with those of the past and in "real life." Internet dating, despite its possibilities for verbal intimacy and egalitarian relationships, is in actuality more frequently employed for fleeting, "fun" relationships that hold little consequence in the "real" lives of the teens who engage in them beyond self-gratification. Further, the emphasis on "fun" and inconsequentiality suggests that the norms of conduct for teens on-line may be localized to such an extent that teens feel no need to consider how their own partici-

pation might influence others. Because the focus in the Internet date is on individual gratification, teens experience no sense of obligations to the person with whom they are ephemerally committed; as Elizabeth noted, if a person fails to show up at the preappointed time, there are no consequences. Of course, this assumes that both parties agree to the lack of seriousness with which such relations are entered into. Denial of a more intimate connection is not out of maliciousness; those who believe that they are experiencing more than simply a "fun," ephemeral connection are assumed to be not "playing by the rules," as it were.

Teens participating in Internet dating also seem to feel no need to justify their actions among their "real-life" peers, as they might for other, more widely observable actions. In the Net environment, teens are unmoored from local peer groups in which so much of identity is constituted among this age group. Peers are only involved when the participant chooses to involve them, either by conversing about one's individual experiences on-line or, on frequent occasions, watching over one's shoulder as a friend converses with others on-line. Most frequently, however, teens on-line experience themselves as individuals removed, to some extent, from their local social context. As autonomous persons in interaction, teens are like the adult counterparts to Giddens's (1991) "pure" relationship in their search for connection yet are very different in that trust is not a factor in the relationships achieved, nor must they risk "authentic" self-revelation to achieve gratification.

It is also worth noting that much like the teen dating experiences of the midcentury, there is a noticeable absence of other classes and races beyond the Caucasian, middle-class norm of the Net. Participation in teen chat rooms is increasingly forbidden in school and community center contexts, and thus young people with limited means are less likely than their middle-class counterparts to have access to the technology.

This research, therefore, leaves us with several more questions regarding the future of the Internet as a possible site for community building, particularly among teens. If these postmodern "pure" relationships might be considered a youthful precursor to the more serious, "pure" relationships its participants will presumably enter on adulthood, one wonders: will authenticity in the lived environment appear less—or perhaps more—important as a characteristic of these meaningful relationships as a result? I think the fact that the "other" in the relationship is hardly considered, or is assumed to share one's level of commitment and self-gratification, is telling. Teens in chat rooms, after

all, experience themselves as a gathering of unconnected individuals, seeking others (or usually one other) with whom to converse and thereby achieve gratification. Perhaps these individualistic relationships underscore the increased localization of caring, thus implying the increased lack of any communal sense of identity. Teen chat rooms become a space outside the stream of everyday life, a space for the development of the ideal "pure" relationship of the contemporary age: one with imagined intimacy but no need for trust or commitment; thus one that is fulfilling and liberating, ultimately and primarily, to the self. In this sense, then, the self-gratification of dating on the Net can be seen as a natural outgrowth of current cultural conditions. The technology does not enable a wide-scale social change toward greater self-reflexivity but allows this already occurring practice to find a new avenue for its expression and development.

Notes

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2. I paid each of the leaders \$25 for their efforts and paid each of the participants they recruited \$8. I also provided money for pizza, which the leader purchased at the conclusion of the discussion.
3. For an illustration of warnings in the popular press, see, for example, Rozen, L. (1997, November). Undercover on the Internet. *Good Housekeeping*, pp. 76-78, 82.
4. It should be noted, however, that while the teens in my study by and large noted preferences for the teen chat rooms, many of them had experimented with the more racy adult chat rooms, as well.

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