Say's reading materials

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Why Online Dating Can Feel Like Such an Existential Nightmare

Matchmaking sites have officially surpassed friends and family in the world of dating, injecting modern romance with a dose of radical individualism. Maybe that's the problem

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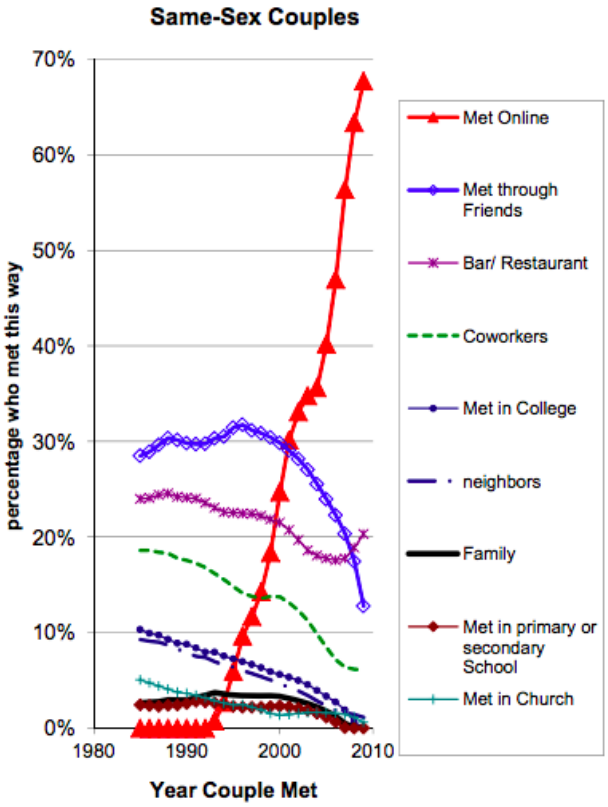
My maternal grandparents met through mutual friends at a summer pool party in the suburbs of Detroit shortly after World War II. Thirty years later, their oldest daughter met my dad in Washington, D.C., at the suggestion of a mutual friend from Texas. Forty years after that, when I met my girlfriend in the summer of 2015, one sophisticated algorithm and two rightward swipes did all the work.

My family story also serves as a brief history of romance. Robots are not yet replacing our jobs. But they're supplanting the role of matchmaker once held by friends and family.

For the past 10 years, the Stanford sociologist Michael Rosenfeld has been compiling data on how couples meet. In almost any other period, this project would have been an excruciating bore. That's because for centuries, most couples met the same way: They relied on their families and friends to set them up. In sociology-speak, our relationships were "mediated." In human-speak, your wingman was your dad.

But dating has changed more in the past two decades than in the previous 2,000 years, thanks to the explosion of matchmaking sites such as Tinder, OKCupid, and Bumble. A 2012 paper co-written by Rosenfeld found that the share of straight couples who met online rose from about zero percent in the mid-1990s to about 20 percent in 2009. For gay couples, the figure soared to nearly 70 percent.



Source: Michael J. Rosenfeld, "Searching for a Mate: The Rise of the Internet as a Social Intermediary" (*American Sociological Review*, 2012)

In a new paper awaiting publication, Rosenfeld finds that the online-dating phenomenon shows no signs of abating. According to data collected through 2017, the majority of straight couples now meet online or at bars and restaurants. As the co-authors write in their conclusion, "Internet dating has displaced friends and family [as] key intermediaries." We used to rely on intimates to screen our future partners. Now that's work we have to do ourselves, getting by with a little help from our robots.

Last week, I tweeted the main graph from Rosenfeld's latest, a decision we both mildly regret, because it inundated my mentions and ruined his inbox. "I think I got about 100 media requests over the weekend," he told me ruefully on the phone when I called him on Monday. (*The*

Atlantic could not secure permission to publish the graph before the paper's publication in a journal, but you can see it on page 15 here.)

I figured my Twitter audience—entirely online, disproportionately young, and intimately familiar with dating sites—would accept the inevitability of online matchmaking. But the most common responses to my post were not hearty cheers. They were lamentations about the spiritual bankruptcy of modern love. Bryan Scott Anderson, for example, suggested that the rise of online dating "may be an illustration of heightened isolation and a diminished sense of belonging within communities."

It is true, as Rosenfeld's data show, that online dating has freed young adults from the limitations and biases of their hometowns. But to be free of those old crutches can be both exhilarating and exhausting. As the influence of friends and family has melted away, the burden of finding a partner has been swallowed whole by the individual—at the very moment that expectations of our partners are skyrocketing.

Once upon a time, wealthy families considered matrimonies akin to mergers; they were coldhearted business opportunities to expand a family's financial power. Even in the late 19th century, marriage was more practicality than rom-com, whereas today's daters are looking for nothing less than a human Swiss Army knife of self-actualization. We seek "spiritual, intellectual, social, as well as sexual soul mates," the sociologist Jessica Carbino told *The Atlantic*'s *Crazy/Genius* podcast. She said she regarded this self-imposed ambition as "absolutely unreasonable."

If the journey toward coupling is more formidable than it used to be, it's also more lonesome. With the declining influence of friends and family and most other social institutions, more single people today are on their own, having set up shop at a digital bazaar where one's appearance, interestingness, quick humor, lighthearted banter, sex appeal, photo selection—one's *worth*—is submitted for 24/7 evaluation before an audience of distracted or cruelstrangers, whose distraction and cruelty might be related to the fact that they are also undergoing the same anxious appraisal.

This is the part where most writers name-drop the "paradox of choice"—a dubious finding from the annals of behavioral psychology, which claims that decision makers are always paralyzed when faced with an abundance of options for jam, or hot sauce, or future husbands. (They aren't.) But the deeper issue isn't the number of options in the digital dating pool, or any specific life category, but rather the sheer tonnage of *life choices*, more generally. Gone are the days when young generations inherited religions and occupations and life paths from their parents as if they were unalterable strands of DNA. This is the age of DIY-everything, in which individuals are charged with the full-service construction of their careers, lives, faiths, and public identities. When in the 1840s the Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard called anxiety "the dizziness of freedom," he wasn't slamming the door on modernity so much as foreseeing its existential contradiction: All the forces of maximal freedom are also forces of anxiety, because anybody who feels obligated to select the ingredients of a perfect life from an infinite menu of options may feel lost in the infinitude.

Rosenfeld isn't so existentially vexed. "I don't see something to worry about here," he told me on the phone. "For people who want partners, they really, *really* want partners, and online dating seems to be serving that need adequately. Your friends and your mom know a few dozen people. Match.com knows a million. Our friends and moms were underserving us."

Historically, the "underserving" was most severe for single gay people. "In the past, even if mom was supportive of her gay kids, she probably didn't know other gay people to introduce them to," Rosenfeld said. The rapid adoption of online dating among the LGBTQ community speaks to a deeper truth about the internet: It's most powerful (for better and for worse) as a tool for helping minorities of all stripes—political, social, cultural, sexual—find one another. "Anybody looking for something hard to find is advantaged by the bigger choice set. That's true whether you're looking for a Jewish person in a mostly Christian area; or a gay person in a mostly straight area; or a vegan, mountain-climbing former Catholic anywhere," Rosenfeld said.

Online dating's rapid success got an assist from several other demographic trends. For example, college graduates are getting married later, using the bulk of their 20s to pay down their student debt, try on different occupations, establish a career, and maybe even save a bit of money. As a result, today's young adults likely spend more time being single. With these years of singledom taking place far away from hometown institutions, such as family and school, the apps are acting in loco parentis.

By the way, the fact that Americans are marrying later is not necessarily a bad thing. (Neither, perhaps, is avoiding marriage altogether.) Almost 60 percent of marriages that begin before the age of 22 end in divorce, but the same goes for just 36 percent of those who marry from the ages of 29 to 34. "Age is important for so many reasons," Rosenfeld said. "You know about yourself, but also you know more about the other person, because *they* know more about *themselves*. You're marrying each other after you've each figured some stuff out."

In this interpretation, online dating didn't disempower friends, or fission the nuclear family, or gut the Church, or stultify marriage, or tear away the many other social institutions of neighborhood and place that we remember, perhaps falsely, as swathing American youth in a warm blanket of Norman Rockwellian wholesomeness. It merely came along as that dusty old shroud was already unraveling.