

Sociologists find older adults turning to online options for love, marriage

January 28 2010



ISU Associate Professor of Sociology Alicia Cast has collaborated on new research studying newlywed couples who first met online. Photo by Bob Elbert, ISU News Service

(PhysOrg.com) -- Some people who find themselves alone on Valentine's Day may be tempted to look for love online. And new research by two Iowa State University sociologists has found that older adults who are turning to their computers to find love -- largely because of the time constraints in their busy lives -- are making their desired love connections.

ISU Associate Professor of Sociology Alicia Cast and her graduate research assistant, Jamie McCartney, have been collecting data from approximately 175 central Iowa newlywed couples over a three-year period. Among the sample, 25 couples first met online -- either through online dating, [social networking sites](#), or some other online means.

In preliminary analysis presented at the Midwest [Sociological](#) Society's annual meeting, the researchers reported that online subjects didn't differ significantly from offline couples in terms of self-esteem levels, attractiveness, intelligence and other personal characteristics. But they had structural constraints that set them apart.

"In many cases, there are some real structural forces that encourage the support and use of these technologies," said Cast. "And one of them is just structural constraints on people's time -- such as people who have kids, or have full-time jobs, or work long or extensive hours. They might also be older and the majority of people who are in their pool of eligibles are already in relationships."

Online couples older, have shorter courtships

The research found that spouses who met online are older, less likely to be marrying for the first time, and have much shorter courtships -- averaging 18.5 months of dating before getting married by comparison to 42 months for those who met in more traditional ways offline.

"There's an interesting contradiction there because the people who look online may not be perceived as being serious [by friends and family]," Cast said. "But the people who are doing the actual searching may look at it as a way to be incredibly serious about the process. And one of the things we found was that, indeed, their courtship periods are shorter."

McCartney first identified the online trend among the study's sample, which Cast says has afforded them a rare research opportunity.

"My understanding is that there are very few studies that have been able to simultaneously get access to a source of couples who meet through more conventional means, along with those who choose to meet people online," she said.

Cast and McCartney continue to analyze data from their newlywed sample and are planning to publish that study in a professional journal.

Traditional proposals are the most powerful

While her new research has found that people are using online means to find love, a previous study Cast conducted with ISU Associate Professor of Sociology David Schweingruber suggests that a traditional proposal may have the most powerful impact when a couple decides to get married. Their study of 2,174 Midwestern university students on audience judgments about engagement proposals (published Sept. 29, 2007 in the journal *Sex Roles*) found that using traditional proposal elements -- making the proposal on one's knee with an engagement ring -- still sends the most positive messages about the strength of the couple's relationship to their family and friends.

"Taking to one's knee is still the gold standard, and so is a diamond [among the perceptions of friends and family]," Cast said. "Most couples know what's going to happen and so issues of sizing rings and those kinds of things are largely done behind the scenes. But if you have a partner who doesn't do that and surprises you, then there is this kind of public evaluation where it's not considered serious until you show them the ring."

The study also found that both men and women and older and younger individuals were likely to evaluate relationships based on their conformity to traditional proposal scripts.

Provided by Iowa State University

Citation: Sociologists find older adults turning to online options for love, marriage (2010, January 28) retrieved 27 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2010-01-sociologists-older-adults-online-options.html>

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