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SHORTCUTS

## Blinded by Science in the Online Dating Game

By ALINA TUGEND

I'VE been checking out Internet dating sites recently. No, I'm not in the market (although my husband is a little suspicious of all this "research"). But since many of my friends use them, I was curious. And because everyone is looking to save money these days, I wanted to know if some sites were more effective — and therefore a better investment — than others.

I didn't know then what a Pandora's Box I was opening with that question. The competition is fierce among companies to prove that their particular method is more scientifically valid. There's everything from hourlong compatibility questionnaires to DNA testing.

But as a consumer, it's pretty hard to figure out how real these claims are and, even more important, whether they make a difference in the search for eternal love.

Jeffrey Lohr, a professor of psychology at the [University of Arkansas](#) who has researched some of these claims, along with two graduate students, [is pretty skeptical](#).

"It seems to me that everybody is marketing their product far beyond the available evidence," Professor Lohr said. "There is none to very little effectiveness in the matching process."

Still, Internet dating is a big business. So it's no wonder that the dating services want to promise as much as possible to their clients. Recent data from Piper Jaffray investment research said that Americans spent \$1.2 billion on online matching sites in 2008, and the company predicted that would rise to \$1.7 billion by 2013.

Professor Lohr does praise initial efforts by Helen Fisher, a research professor in the anthropology department at Rutgers.

Professor Fisher, who is billed prominently on the Chemistry.com Web site — an offshoot of Match.com — has studied the neural chemistry of people in love. She zeroes in on six specific chemicals, which, she says, are linked to certain traits. Those with a preponderance of dopamine and norepinephrine she named "explorers," those with serotonin are labeled "builders," those with testosterone are called "directors" and those with estrogen and oxytocin are "negotiators."

The 56-question test that Professor Fisher has developed for Chemistry.com helps identify who is a builder, an explorer and so on. She has also studied 28,000 people on the Web site, and found that those who are labeled explorers tend to pick explorers, those who are builders tend to choose builders, while directors and negotiators often select each other.

There is some evidence from other scientists that these choices lead to happy long-term relationships, although "nobody knows for sure," Professor Fisher said. That, she said, is the next step in her research.

It costs \$49.95 for a one-month package at Chemistry.com and \$35 for a one-month subscription to

Match.com

The dating site eHarmony promotes its 258-question form, which takes about an hour to complete, as the best way to find a mate for the long term.

Gian Gonzaga, senior research scientist at eHarmony, said that studies his company had conducted of married people who met through eHarmony and a control group who met in other ways found that those who linked up through eHarmony were happier.

The only trouble, as Professor Lohr points out, is that couples who met through eHarmony had been married only six months and were “still in the honeymoon phase,” while the control group couples had been married about two years.

Mr. Gonzaga acknowledged the difference, but said the study was statistically controlled for length of marriage and other factors.

Mr. Gonzaga is now conducting a five-year longitudinal study following engaged couples — those who met through his Web site and those who found each other through different means.

Carol Goldman is one of the success stories. She met her fiancé, Todd Huttunen, through eHarmony about a year ago and they're getting married next week.

She signed on to a number of sites in the five years since her divorce and, she said, “kissed a lot of frogs.” The first man she met on eHarmony was already married, she said, but added that she and Mr. Huttunen were “phenomenally well matched.”

James Houran, a relationship psychologist who has developed “compatibility matching tools” for [Plentyoffish.com](http://Plentyoffish.com), a free online dating site, said his work indicated that people who met someone through the site were more satisfied in their relationships than those who met in other ways.

His system “is better than chance, but we don't know how much better,” he said. “But we know it's better than any other system.”

Articles by Mr. Houran and Professor Fisher on their methods are in the process of being peer-reviewed, they said.

The question is how much it really matters to users if the methods have any scientific basis. A friend of mine, who asked not to be identified because she didn't want her son to know she was using the sites, said she looked at several dating sites and chose the ones that looked like they had “the least riffraff.”

So much for science.

My friend Mike has been trolling online dating sites on and off for several years and has probably met 40 to 50 men. He said he didn't really understand what his label on Chemistry.com meant, although he did enjoy asking his dates, “How do you feel going out with a builder and a negotiator?”

He is less interested in the science of the whole thing than in sheer numbers since, as a gay suburban single dad, he has a hard time meeting someone interested in a committed relationship, he said.

All the questions and tools intended to fix up like-minded people are nice, he said, but after being stood up recently, the question he wants to see on dating Web sites is, “If you commit to a date, will you actually show up?”

If you think actual chemistry may help you find chemistry, then you may want to try DNA testing, which is apparently the new frontier in creating a successful match. For \$99, [Genepartner.com](http://Genepartner.com) offers to send you a kit to swab inside your cheek. You send it back to the company, based in Switzerland, and get a GenePartner ID.

The GenePartner project, as the company says on its Web site, was inspired by a study in which female volunteers smelled T-shirts worn by men for three consecutive days, and then rated them for attractiveness. Researchers found that women preferred the T-shirts from men who had certain genes that were most different from their own.

GenePartner scientists, the company says, then developed a formula that successfully determined genetic compatibility. After receiving the results of your DNA sample, you can — for an extra fee — hunt for your genetic soul mate on [Genepartner.com](http://Genepartner.com).

I asked Bonny Albo, who writes about online dating for [About.com](http://About.com), which is owned by The New York Times, what she thought about these claims and if her readers were particularly interested in the science claims of dating sites.

“I get the question about scientific validity from readers all the time,” she said. She says she believes that some of the sites have pretty good science behind them. Her eHarmony profile, for example, was right on target.

“But,” she said, “did it help me find true love? No.”

So what is the next step? Ms. Albo talked about online speed dating or Second Life virtual dating. But, she said, it might end up being something really radical — like abandoning the online world and going back to meeting people through friends and family.

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