

Whom we (say we) want: Stated and actual preferences in online dating

Andrew T. Fiore¹, Lindsay Shaw Taylor²,
Gerald A. Mendelsohn², Coye Cheshire¹
UC Berkeley, ¹School of Information, ²Department of Psychology

INTRODUCTION

Contemporary norms encourage colorblindness and openness in social relationships. But do people who say they are open to dating someone from a different group actually do so?

To address this question, we examined the online dating profiles of more than 1 million users of a large online dating site along with their actual behavior on the site. That is, we compared their stated preferences for the ethnicity of potential partners with the demographics of the users whom they actually contacted. We included participants' stated and demonstrated preferences for the religion of partners as a comparison.

We hypothesized that participants would say they are more open to dating people of other ethnicities than their behavior indicates they actually are. We anticipated no such differences with regard to religion.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This research was supported in part by the National Science Foundation, HSD-IIS 0624356.

METHODOLOGY

Through collaboration with a major U.S. online dating site, we parsed, anonymized, and analyzed more than 1 million profiles and tens of millions of communication records spanning 8 months in 2009. The profiles contain each user's own demographics as well as his/her stated preferences for the qualities of an ideal mate. The communication records allow us to find the true demographics of the people a user actually contacts (from their profiles) and compare them to the user's stated preferences.

To investigate whether people seek out others like them in terms of ethnicity and religion, we first compared the proportion of users said they were seeking someone like themselves with the proportion who actually contacted *only* people of the same ethnicity or religion. But this alone is insufficient, because population distributions dominated by Caucasians and Christians mean that a large number of pairs could be homogeneous simply by chance. Thus, we also compared the person-wise average proportion of contacts to people of the same ethnicity or religion with the proportion we would expect to see if heterosexual contacts were made randomly among the population of users ("expected prop. same"), given the distributions of ethnicity and religion.

DISCUSSION

Why is there a discrepancy between stated preferences and actual behavior for ethnicity but not for religion?

- Self-presentational concerns: We suspect that there are stronger social prohibitions against stating openly that you prefer to date someone of the same race than of the same religion. Most people are probably more concerned about being perceived as racist than religionist.
- People might be unaware of the degree to which ethnicity affects their partner selection, whereas decisions on the basis of religion might be more conscious. In other words, people who care a lot about religion and choose partners accordingly might be more mindful of those preferences and indicate them explicitly, whereas ethnicity may operate more in the background.

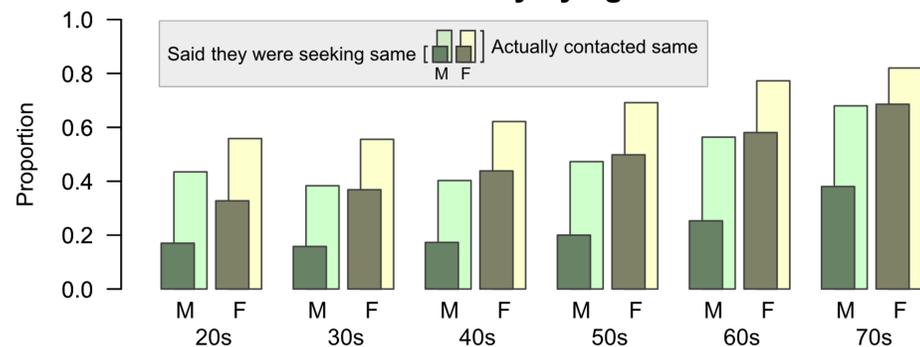
Gender and age cohort effects

- Overall, women were pickier than men. There is some suggestion that women are evolved to prefer homophily and be pickier than men because of their greater parental investment (Greer & Buss, 1994; Trivers, 1972). Our data are consistent with that notion to a degree, although women of childbearing age were not significantly pickier, relative to men their own age, than older women.
- We advise against making too much of the age differences in this study because age is confounded with the diversity of the sample. Specifically, older people in the sample are even more predominantly white and Christian. Thus, the fact that older people contact a lower proportion of outgroup-ethnicity partners than younger people might reflect a relative lack of openness to outgroup partners, but it could also be due to the more homogenous pool.

ETHNICITY

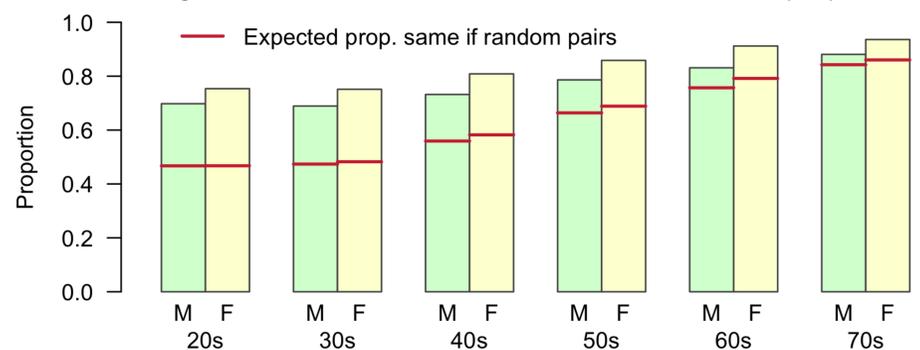
(Sample was 73% Caucasian)

Proportion of users who sought and contacted only people of the same ethnicity by age and sex



Average proportion of contacts to same ethnicity by age and sex

Among users who initiated contact with at least two different people



The pattern of **stated preferences** is similar for ethnicity and religion:

- Most people do not state an exclusive preference for ingroup partners.
- Men are more open than women.
- Younger people are more open than older people.

The interesting differences are with **actual partner selection**:

- Ethnicity:** Men and women of both ages are less open to outgroup partners than they say they are.
- Religion:** Behavior largely matches preferences. In fact, older people are even more open than they say they are.

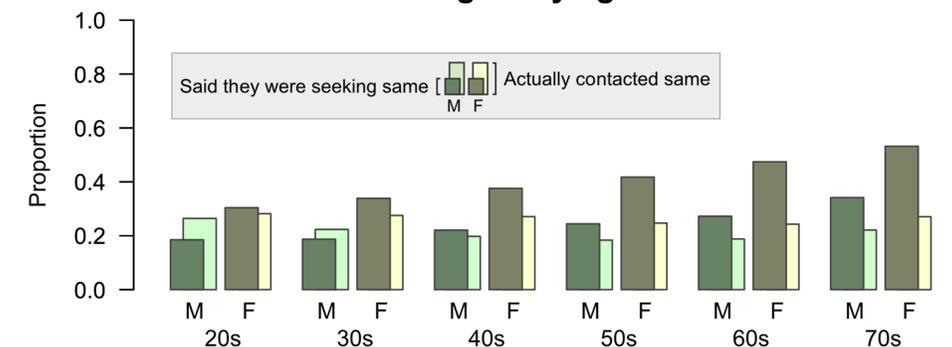
Compared with **chance rates** of contact:

- Ethnicity:** People contacted same-ethnicity partners much more than would be predicted by chance (though there is likely a ceiling effect for older people).
- Religion:** Participants did not disproportionately seek out same-religion partners — levels nearly matched what we would expect if contacts were random.

RELIGION

(Sample was 71% Christian)

Proportion of users who sought and contacted only people of the same religion by age and sex



Average proportion of contacts to same religion by age and sex

Among users who initiated contact with at least two different people

