



## *The Flirting Report*

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**Report of research conducted by  
The Social Issues Research Centre**

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# The Flirting Report

Kate Fox, Social Issues Research Centre, 2004

## Introduction

This study set out to explore the nature of flirting in Britain today. What is flirting? How much do we flirt? What are the rules? What are the taboos? Who do we flirt with? Where are the hotbeds of flirting, and where are the no-go areas? And what about the future of flirting: how will our flirting habits have changed by the year 2020, and beyond?

We were particularly interested to discover how flirting habits may be affected by modern trends and innovations, such as the rise of the 'singleton' and the advent of email and internet dating. Which aspects of flirting are 'innate' and unchangeable, and which are influenced by new sociocultural trends and patterns? And of course, the Big Question: should women take the initiative and ask men out?

## Methods

The research was conducted in three stages: a literature review, focus groups and a national survey. We have also drawn significantly on material from SIRC's ongoing 'social intelligence' monitoring of sociocultural trends and patterns, including data from observation fieldwork, participant observation studies and interviews.

## Literature review

Using international database and library searches, SIRC collated and reviewed all of the most recent academic research papers, books and journal articles on the subject of flirting and related issues. A selected bibliography is included in this report.

## Focus groups

Focus groups were conducted with a representative sample of young people. The focus groups explored their understanding and perceptions of flirting; the role of flirting in their lives; where, when, how and with whom they flirt; their personal rules and taboos; how new social trends have affected their flirting and dating habits; etc.

## National survey

Analysis of the focus-group material provided the basis for a national survey, involving interviews with a representative sample of 1000 young people (aged 18-40) across the country. Respondents were asked a series of questions about their relationships and their flirting behaviour, designed to reveal the nature and patterns of flirting and mating in Britain today.

## What is flirting?

In order to assess the impact of new social and cultural trends, it is essential to understand the more fundamental, instinctive aspects of flirting – the evolutionary 'roots' of our flirting habits.

## Two types of flirting

Our review of the research on this issue, and the responses of participants in our focus groups, indicate that dictionary definitions of flirting only tell half the story. They tend to stress the playful, non-serious aspects of flirting, defining the verb 'to flirt', for example, as 'To behave or act amorously without emotional commitment' or 'To make playfully romantic or sexual overtures'.

This is the truth, but it is not the whole truth. Our research shows that there are two types of flirting. There is flirting for fun – the sense conveyed by the dictionary definitions – but there is also what we might call 'flirting with intent', that is flirting as part of the mate-selection and courtship process: flirting to get someone into bed, or into a relationship. One of our focus group participants expressed the views of many when he said:

*"There's flirting to make a move on someone or flirting to have a laugh with someone."*

## Evolutionary hard-wiring

Flirting is a basic instinct, part of human nature. We are genetically programmed to flirt. If you think about it, this is hardly surprising: if we did not initiate contact and express interest in members of the opposite sex, we would not reproduce, and the human species would become extinct. We were not surprised, therefore, to find that only one percent of the respondents in our national survey said that they did not flirt.

Some evolutionary psychologists now argue that flirting may even be the foundation of civilization as we know it. The theory is that the large human brain – our complex language, superior intelligence, culture, everything that distinguishes us from animals – is the equivalent of the peacock's tail: a courtship device evolved to attract and retain sexual partners. If this argument – jokingly known as the 'chat-up theory of evolution' – is correct, human achievements in everything from art to literature to rocket science may be merely a side-effect of the essential ability to charm.

The idea of NASA as an accidental by-product of primeval chat-ups might seem somewhat far-fetched, but it is clear that evolution favours flirts. The most skilful charmers among our distant ancestors were the most likely to attract mates and pass on their charming genes. We are descended from a long line of successful flirts, and the flirting instinct is hard-wired into our brains.

### Primeval flirting patterns

Anthropologists have found that flirting follows universal patterns. From London night-clubs and New York singles bars to the highlands of New Guinea and the Amazonian jungle, people use the same flirtatious body language. Human flirtation involves sequences of gestures and expressions not unlike the 'courtship dances' of birds and other animals that we see on wildlife programmes. Characteristic features of the human flirtation sequence include what ethologists call the 'copulatory gaze' (intense eye contact), the smile, body synchrony, female coy looks and head-tossing, and male chest-thrusting.

Contrary to popular opinion, researchers have found that two thirds of these flirtation sequences are initiated by women. In this respect, human behaviour is again similar to that of other species. Chimpanzee females, for example, actively solicit sex with males, going so far as to pull a resting male to his feet and insist on copulation. This is known as 'female proceptivity'. Among humans, female proceptivity is much more subtle: in fact, female solicitation is done so unobtrusively that most people think that men take the initiative in sexual advances. Women use subtle non-verbal cues to initiate the courtship sequence, but these signals are so discreet that men are not consciously aware of them, and usually believe that they have made the first move.

When the biologist Timothy Perper, who studied pick-ups in American singles bars, asked men to describe the pick-up sequences he had observed, all but three of his many interviewees left out the initial parts of the sequence, where the woman had been sending out up to 52 different varieties of non-verbal signal, and spoke only about what they themselves had done. Other studies also indicate that men are not consciously aware of female seductive signals, although they clearly respond.

### Crossed wires

Even when people – male or female – are highly aware of flirtatious signalling, it is easy to make mistakes. For a start, the two types of flirting defined above – flirting for fun and flirting with intent – don't actually look or sound very different. Even when we are flirting with intent, our manner is usually playful and teasing, not solemn and formal. We may in fact be engaged in a serious attempt to assess someone's suitability as a potential mate – and to advertise our own fitness for this position – but we do not conduct this mate-selection process like a job interview. We exchange glances, smiles, jokes, compliments and touches, not CVs and job descriptions.

The initial stages of 'flirting with intent' can thus appear, to the naked eye, indistinguishable from 'flirting for fun' – and this similarity can be a source of confusion and misunderstanding, most problematically when a bit of flirtatious banter is

mistaken for something more serious. We may be 'wired to flirt', but it seems that the wires can sometimes get crossed. One of our focus group participants asked:

*"If flirting is instinctive, why do we get it wrong? Why are there so many misunderstandings?"*

The answer is that although we are programmed to flirt, flirting, like every other 'instinctive' human activity, involves an element of social learning. We are programmed to eat, for example, but we are not born with perfect table manners. Flirting, in all cultures, is governed by a complex set of unwritten laws of etiquette. These rules dictate where, when, with whom and in what manner we flirt. We generally obey these unofficial laws automatically, without being conscious of doing so. We only become aware of the rules when someone commits a breach of this etiquette – by flirting with the wrong person, perhaps, or at an inappropriate time or place. The more complex and subtle aspects of flirting etiquette can be confusing, and most of us have made a few embarrassing mistakes. This potential for misunderstanding and confusion helps to explain the popularity of self-help books on flirting and dating manuals.

### Optimistic males

Some of the 'crossed wires' of flirting, however, may stem from more deep-seated contradictions. Misunderstandings can arise, for example, from the fact that men tend to mistake women's friendliness for sexual interest. In fact, research has shown that men are inclined to interpret almost any positive female behaviour as a sign of sexual availability.

This excessive optimism may seem irrational, but it has an important evolutionary adaptive function: if males were not optimistic about their chances, they would lack motivation to attempt sexual intercourse with females and spread their genes. The more optimistic of our male ancestors tried more often, by the law of averages succeeded more often, and produced more offspring. Today's males are descended from these primeval optimists: the tendency to interpret mildly friendly female behaviour as seductive sexiness is part of their evolutionary programming. This may be annoying, but there is not much we can do about it. On the plus side, it has ensured the survival of the species.

Although male over-optimism is natural, and not a sign that men are stupid or deluded, there is also evidence to suggest that women are naturally more socially skilled than men, better at interpreting people's behaviour and responding appropriately. (Some scientists have even claimed that women have a special 'diplomacy gene' which men lack.)

### Deceptive females

More recent research has, however, revealed another reason why men may overestimate female sexual interest. A study

published in the journal *Evolution and Human Behaviour* found that women send highly ambiguous, deceptive signals, particularly in the first minute of an encounter with a male.

This is described by the researchers as a form of 'Protean' behaviour – named after the mythical Greek river-god Proteus, who evaded capture by his enemies by constantly and unpredictably changing his physical form, disguising himself as an animal, plant, cloud or tree. Women, albeit unconsciously, send unpredictable, misleading signals to 'trick' men into revealing more of their real intentions than they would otherwise do. This is because women (historically, genetically) have more to lose from making a poor choice of sexual partner than men, as they have a higher investment of time, energy and resources in the offspring of such matings.

Women, according to the researchers, have evolved subliminal control strategies to manipulate men into revealing information about their mating interests and intentions, without the men being consciously aware of the signals involved. By sending erratic and ambiguous 'Protean' signals in the early stages of an encounter, women manipulate men into 'showing their hand' – expressing their interests and intentions verbally – allowing the female to evaluate the male's suitability as a potential mate.

It is perhaps not entirely surprising, given the levels of ambiguity and deception to which they are subjected, that males of the species tend to become confused. The researchers conclude that female 'Protean' behaviour "may result in men's overestimation of female sexual interest."

### Mate-selection patterns

Our evolutionary heritage also has a significant influence on who we flirt with – which members of the opposite sex we are likely to regard as suitable mates. Evolution has favoured males who select young, attractive mates and females who select partners with power, wealth and status. Men therefore naturally tend to seek women who are younger than them and place greater emphasis on physical beauty, while women are more likely to favour older males with higher status and earning potential.

These facts may not accord with our politically correct sensibilities, but they have been confirmed in dozens of studies and experiments, across a wide range of cultures. In one study of thirty-seven different cultures – from rural Zulus to urban Brazilians – the psychologist David Buss found that men were universally attracted to young, good-looking females, while women were drawn to males with goods, property or money. Analysis of personal ads – where people are more explicit about their requirements, and more obviously conscious of the requirements of others – also shows that these are the attributes most consistently demanded and offered by mate-seekers.

## British flirting today

### The rise of the 'singleton'

There has been much talk in recent years about the decline of marriage and the rise of the 'singleton' in modern Western cultures. We are constantly told that people nowadays are staying single for much longer, cohabiting rather than getting married, delaying having children until much later, and more likely to divorce. These tenets of popular wisdom are repeated so often that they have acquired the status of facts, and are rarely questioned.

The statistics on our marriage patterns tell a different story. In fact, marriage is as popular as it has ever been: over 90 percent of us get married. The percentage of 'never married' people was almost the same in 1989 as in 1890. Nor are we marrying very much later: in 1990 the median age at which a woman got married was 23.9, and a man's median age at marriage was 26.1. One hundred years earlier, in 1890, women married at a median age of 22.0 and men at 26.1. The marriage age is now slightly higher than in 1990: up to just under 27 for men and 25 for women in 1998. We think that the current marriage age is a new phenomenon because we tend to compare current marriage patterns with those of the 1950s, when people did get married much earlier (women at 20.2, men at 22.6). The 1950s, however, were a 'blip', an aberration, the most unusual decade of the 20th century, and the least representative of our natural mating patterns.

It is certainly true, however, that divorce rates have increased significantly over the last century or so. Or rather, divorce rates in Western industrialised cultures have increased dramatically, since the Industrial Revolution. But current divorce rates in such cultures cannot be regarded as abnormally or unnaturally high: according to the anthropologist Helen Fisher, they are no higher than those of hunter-gatherer societies and other cultures in which couples are less economically dependent on one another. When we look at cross-cultural and historical patterns of divorce, we find that high divorce rates are typical of all societies in which spouses have higher economic independence. Low divorce rates are common in all societies which use the plough for agriculture – farming societies such as, for example, pre-industrial Europe. Where couples 'work the land' together, they are tied to the land and to each other. In nomadic, hunter-gatherer and industrialised cultures, economic independence – particularly female economic independence – is correlated with high divorce rates.

So, it seems that many of the current received wisdoms about dramatic social changes and entirely new mating patterns have little basis in fact. This does not mean that the much-debated 'rise of the singleton' is merely an illusion. We may be statistically just as likely to marry, and to marry relatively

young, as we ever were, but we are certainly much more likely to live alone before marriage (or after divorce) than we have been in the past. We are also much less likely to be living in the small, stable communities and strong kinship networks for which we are adapted by evolution. Families and communities have become scattered and fragmented, and singletons often attempt to compensate for this loss by forming family-like bonds with small groups of close friends, who may even live together in shared flats or houses.

The broad statistics on marriage patterns may also be masking differences between social groups, particularly class differences. There is evidence to suggest that the more affluent middle classes may well be marrying later – and indeed most of the literature on singletons (whether fictional icons such as Bridget Jones or non-fiction debates and discussion in the lifestyle sections of Sunday newspapers) deals almost exclusively with the professional and chattering classes. The trends do also appear to be fairly steadily upwards, with women in particular marrying later and later.

### **'Prolonged adolescence': the Peter Pan culture**

It is also clear that our perceptions have changed, and many people nowadays feel under less pressure to get married or 'settle down' with a long-term partner while still in their twenties or thirties. Perhaps one of the most striking findings of the SIRC study was that in our national survey, there was no age difference in the level of concern expressed about finding a partner or being 'left on the shelf'. Fifty-one percent of 18-24 year old singletons said that they were "Not at all concerned – I never think about it", but so did 57 percent of 25-34 year old singletons and even 54 percent of 35-40 year old singletons.

There was also no significant difference between the sexes in responses to this question, with 56 percent of men and 52 percent of women saying that they were "Not at all concerned" about finding a partner, and only 9 percent of men and women saying that they were "Very concerned".

These findings suggest that many modern British singletons are enjoying what might be described as a sort of 'prolonged adolescence' – remaining deliberately single and carefree, and avoiding the commitment and responsibility of marriage and children for as long as possible. This Peter Pan culture among singletons was confirmed in our focus groups and fieldwork interviews, where even people in their thirties often expressed the view that they were still too young to 'settle down':

*"I am quite happy being single. I don't have time for a boyfriend. Sometimes after a bad day I think it might be nice to have someone, but generally I get my little hits of flirting on a Friday night that keep me going for the rest of the week."*

*"I'm only 35. I don't feel ready for all that grown-up get-married-have-kids stuff. I'm having fun. Maybe when I'm 40 I'll start thinking about it. Or maybe 45? But it's a bit different for women, because of the biological clock"*

It seems that, for many people in our society, the 30s are the new 20s. We are living longer and healthier lives than ever before in human history, and we are able to look and feel youthful for much longer. It is no longer unusual for women to delay having children until their late thirties or even later, or even to opt out of motherhood altogether (some forecasters are predicting that up to a fifth will remain childless in the not-too-distant future). The kind of tastes in fashion and entertainment – as well as views on marriage, commitment and responsibility – that used to be characteristic of teenagers or people in their 20s are now being expressed by people in their 30s. Adolescence is being stretched at both ends, with children reaching puberty earlier, and, apparently, reaching what might be called 'maturity' considerably later.

### **A nation of flirts**

Our findings on British flirting habits would certainly seem to support this view. We are clearly a nation of flirts. In our national survey, only one percent of respondents said that they did not flirt. Ninety-nine percent of young Britons admit to at least some flirting, and over a third said that they had flirted with someone either 'today' or 'within the past week'. These findings are of course in line with the evolutionary view of flirting as a 'basic instinct', and were echoed by the participants in our focus groups:

*"I'd say I flirt quite regularly – everyone does, I think."*

*"I think most people flirt even without really realizing it. You may not necessarily try to flirt with anybody – you just do it in an attempt to get on with someone."*

*"Flirting just comes naturally."*

*"When you spend a lot of time with people at work, flirting helps: it's better to have fun"*

*"Catering work is really hard, and flirting pulls you through"*

*"It's real and fun – it's a natural process."*

*"I flirt all the time – I was probably flirting at the hairdressers today – you don't necessarily expect anything to come of it."*

*"I guess I flirt quite a lot. Just talking to people and you're smiling and there's appreciation bouncing backward and forward."*

### **Flirting frequency**

Our national survey showed that males are if anything slightly more flirtatious than females, with more men admitting to

recent flirtation than women (45 percent of men had flirted with someone either 'today' or 'within the past week', compared with 37 percent of women). Flirting is, not surprisingly, more frequent among younger people: at the prime mate-selection age of 18-24, 61 percent had flirted either 'today' or 'within the past week'.

We also found a slight class difference, with the higher echelons of British society emerging as somewhat more flirtatious than the less affluent groups. This may reflect the fact that the professional classes are marrying later, as the survey did show, perhaps reassuringly, that married and co-habiting people flirt much less frequently than singles – although it is interesting to note here that those describing themselves as 'dating' or 'in a relationship' flirted almost as much as those describing themselves as 'single' or 'not seeing anyone'. Marriage (or living-as-married) is clearly still regarded as involving a more exclusive commitment than merely dating or 'seeing someone'.

### The Scheherazade Strategy

Having said that, when we asked people who they flirted with, the most common response was 'spouse or partner'. Twenty-nine percent of men and 43 percent of women said that they mostly flirted with their own spouse or partner, rather than with, say, friends, colleagues or strangers.

This finding may initially seem to be at odds with our evolutionary perspective on flirting – what is the reproductive value of flirting with an established sexual partner? In fact, the evolutionary psychologists argue that flirting is as much about retaining sexual partners as it is about attracting them in the first place. It is in the (genetic) interest of both members of a pair-bond to maintain the affection, interest and sexual attraction of their partner, both to produce more offspring (and, in the case of males, to ensure that the offspring are one's own) and to care for and nurture the existing children of the partnership. Flirting with one's partner is an effective genetic survival strategy, sometimes known as the Scheherazade Strategy, after the 'sustained verbal courtship display' (1001 nights of entertaining stories) of the Grand Vizier's daughter in the Arabian folk tale.

Although retaining the interest of one's spouse is important to both sexes, evolution has particularly favoured females with the ability to elicit long-term male 'investment' in them and their offspring. It is therefore not surprising to find, as our survey did, that women are more inclined to flirt with their spouses or boyfriends.

### Safer flirting

Single people were found, as expected, to flirt more with friends and strangers than those who are married or dating,

although the effect for 'strangers' was much stronger than that for 'friends'. Only 6 percent of married people regularly flirt with strangers, compared with 12 percent of those in dating relationships and 36 percent of singletons. When it comes to flirting with friends, the differences are still there, but less marked: 19 percent of married people regularly flirt with friends, compared with 22 percent of 'daters' and 34 percent of singletons. Flirting with colleagues seems almost equally acceptable to all three groups: 10 percent of married people flirt regularly with work colleagues, as do 12 percent of 'daters' and 18 percent of singletons.

These findings reflect the fact that flirting with established friends and colleagues is regarded as 'safer' – less risky and less threatening – than flirting with strangers or new acquaintances. This leads us to a better understanding of the underlying, unwritten rules of flirting in our society, where flirting among established friends and among work colleagues is often conducted in accordance with a tacitly agreed etiquette: everyone is aware of the boundaries and limits; everyone automatically abides by the unofficial codes of conduct. Our focus group participants and interviewees in our monitoring research confirmed this:

*"With my friends in the pub, flirting is a sort of ritual. We all flirt with each other: it makes us feel good, but we all know it's not serious."*

*"In a work environment you flirt with people you get on with and find them physically attractive, but if they're in a relationship and you're in a relationship, the element of flirting is that there is no real danger – it's not going to threaten their or your life. It's just mutual gain where you jolly each other along."*

### Flirting taboos

The unwritten rules of flirting in our society also include a set of taboos: situations in which flirting is regarded as inappropriate, or people with whom flirting is seen as unacceptable. In our focus groups, three specific flirting taboos emerged as the most significant: flirting with someone else's partner, flirting to advance one's career or get ahead at work and, although to a much lesser extent, using flirtatious charm to get one's own way.

Having identified these taboos, we included a question about them in our national survey, asking which of these uses of flirting respondents regarded as 'unacceptable'. Sure enough, only 9 percent of respondents felt that none of these behaviours was wrong: the vast majority regarded at least one, usually more, as taboo – according to their own personal 'rules' about flirting.

The strongest taboo for Britons seems to be flirting with someone else's partner: 74 percent said that they found this unacceptable. Almost as much disapproval is attached to flirting to advance one's career, with 60 percent of respondents declaring this to be against their rules. As in our focus groups, opinion on the acceptability of using flirtatious charm to get your own way was more divided, with only 33 percent regarding this as unacceptable.

Responses to the question on flirting taboos were remarkably consistent, with no significant age or sex differences, and only very slight regional differences (e.g. people in the South seemed marginally more tolerant towards the three flirting offences than those in the Midlands and North). Class differences were somewhat more marked, but only on one category of flirting taboo: those lower down the social scale are generally less tolerant about the use of flirtatious charm to get one's own way than the higher echelons – 27 percent of those in social class AB found this unacceptable, increasing to 35 percent of the C2s and Ds, and 45 percent of those in social class E.

Many of the participants in our focus groups took a relaxed attitude to the use of flirtatious charm, although most strongly disapproved of flirting to advance one's career:

*"I think most people flirt to get their own way – to get what they want. It's just an extension of being friendly or nice."*

*"I flirt to get extra portions of food from the canteen at work."*

*"It's friendliness blurring into flirting – it's making it nicer and less antagonistic."*

*"I would never flirt with people who work for me, even if I was interested – it would affect the relationship with the team."*

*"I would never flirt to get a job or get a promotion. If anyone suggested I had shagged my way to the top I would be mortified."*

Flirting with someone else's partner was also frowned upon, although some participants felt that the 'unwritten rules' among a group of friends or relatives might allow a certain amount of 'harmless' flirtation of this kind.

*"It depends on what the understanding is among people: I flirt with my friend's boyfriend; I also flirt with my uncle, who is married – but we all know it is just a bit of fun, not serious."*

*"You can have a sort of platonic flirting with people who are married or attached. In some situations it is almost expected – almost like you have to flirt to be polite."*

This last comment reflects a phenomenon we have observed in previous research on this subject, which we call 'courtesy flirting', mainly practised by men, who engage in mild flirtation with women as a form of politeness. 'Courtesy flirting' is particularly common in Britain and Europe (with some differences: the British tend more towards playful teasing, continental Europeans towards compliments) and can be confusing for foreigners, particularly Americans, who mistake it for the real thing.

### The Big Question

There is one Big Question which seems to come up in almost every discussion of flirting and dating: should women take the initiative and ask men out? Most previous research has shown that women are generally reluctant to do this, despite the blandishments of 'liberated' magazines and others advocating greater equality between the sexes or promoting the 'assertive' female as a role model.

It is already established that women do, in fact, initiate the majority of flirtatious encounters (about two thirds, according to the research evidence) but this is done with subtle use of body language. Actually asking the other party out on a date has traditionally been, and is still mainly regarded as, the prerogative and responsibility of the male. Women may discreetly 'solicit' male attention, and convey their interest and attraction in a multitude of subtle signals, but the man is still usually expected to take the ultimate risk of asking for a date.

Many dating manuals and articles in glossy women's magazines constantly insist that it is perfectly acceptable nowadays for women to take the initiative in asking men out. In fact, they never fail to exclaim, men love it when women take the initiative. This is quite true, and if you read the more scientific research on the subject, you will find out why. The studies and experiments show that men perceive women who take the initiative in asking a man out as more sexually available. To put it more bluntly, if a woman asks them out, they think they have a better chance of 'scoring'. Naturally, they are delighted.

Unless, of course, the woman doing the asking is unattractive. It is a curious and consistent feature of the research in this area that when men are asked how they would feel about being approached by a female stranger, or having sex with her, they nearly always envisage an attractive stranger. It is thus not surprising that they tend to express much greater enthusiasm for the idea than women, who, more accustomed to the realities of unwanted sexual advances, tend to envisage the more likely scenario of an approach from an unattractive male.

Assuming, however, that the man being asked out finds the woman in question reasonably attractive, the research evidence indicates that he is highly unlikely to turn her down. In our own survey, 34 percent of women said that they had



asked a man to go out with them: only one percent of these brave pioneers had been turned down.

So, the risk of rejection in asking a man out (providing one chooses a man who has shown at least some evidence of initial attraction) would seem to be extremely low. But a woman contemplating this break with tradition must also weigh up a number of other factors. First, as mentioned above, there is the risk that the man will automatically regard her as more sexually available than women who do not take this initiative. Second, there are the ominous findings of a study entitled 'Response of males to female-initiated dates' published in 1981, which showed that 87 percent of relationships in which females had initiated the first date had ended by the time the couple had been on three dates together. If a woman is looking for respect and for something more than a one- or two-night stand, it seems that asking a man out is not advisable.

But our own survey results tell a somewhat different story. Only 2 percent of the relationships initiated by women ended as one-night stands, and only 5 percent failed to make it past the third date. The majority (51 percent) of the 'female-initiated dates' in our survey led to relationships lasting more than six months. Perhaps relations between the sexes have changed somewhat since 1981, or perhaps the women in our survey were particularly judicious or fortunate in their choice of men. We should not forget, however, that our findings show that a clear majority of British women (64 percent) have still never, ever asked a man out. In focus groups and field interviews, women also still tend to express strong reservations about taking the initiative in this way, as well as some rather pragmatic objections:

*"I'm too embarrassed to ask a man out. I think that's the man's role."*

*"I can be really suggestive, but I wouldn't actually ask a man out."*

*"My feeling is, why should I take the risk? If a man wants to go out with a woman, he will ask her. He knows it is up to him – most women don't ever ask men out – so if he doesn't ask me, I assume he's not interested."*

*"That's right. I mean, you'll let him know you're attracted, without actually spelling it out; you'll exchange phone numbers, but you wouldn't actually ring up and say do you want to go for a drink or whatever."*

There was, however, an interesting twist in our survey findings. When we asked men if a woman had ever asked them out on a date, 71 percent said 'Yes'. This result clearly did not quite tally with the mere 34 percent of women who admitted to having asked a man out. Either these 34 percent have been very busy – each of them asking out at least two men (or some

of them issuing a whole string of invitations) – or a number of our respondents are being somewhat economical with the truth, or, to be more charitable, interpreting the question in different ways. We made the question as clear and specific as possible: "Have you ever asked a man to go out on a date with you" and "Has a woman ever asked you to go out on a date with her", but given the potential for misunderstanding and confusion in human flirtation – particularly the well-documented tendency of males to overestimate female sexual interest in them – it may be that some men read a more subtle signal as a direct invitation, or that some women are embarrassed to admit to issuing direct invitations.

There was also an intriguing difference in male and female responses to the follow-up question "How long did that relationship last". While only one percent of women admitted to being turned down, 9 percent of men said that they had refused the invitation. Half of the women claimed that the relationship resulting from this 'female-initiated date' had lasted more than 6 months, compared with less than a third of the men. Nearly a third of the men told us that the relationship had lasted less than a month.

It is impossible to determine exactly what factors were responsible for these discrepancies in the responses, but it does seem as though a certain amount of wishful thinking or rose-tinted hindsight may have been involved. One must also always take account of what researchers call the 'Social Desirability Bias', defined as an error on self-report measures due to respondents attempting to present themselves in a socially desirable light – otherwise known as boasting.

So, what is the answer to the Big Question? Should women ask men out or not? Leaving aside our egalitarian, feminist sensibilities, our response would be, on balance, 'Not'. Or rather, to put it slightly less bluntly: they may do so if they wish, but it is not necessary. The primeval, instinctive pattern of subtle female initiation, using ambiguous non-verbal signals to discover the male's intentions, followed by a transfer of initiative to the male at the critical point of declaring interest, has worked perfectly well for thousands of years. Whether we approve or not, the latest research findings show that not much has changed. Males still tend towards an over-optimistic interpretation of female signals, females still judiciously adjust their signals to encourage only selected males, while allowing males to think that they are making the choice. Some females (perhaps 34 percent) may occasionally attempt to take charge of the entire process, denying males the already very small element of control nature has left them, but the majority, perhaps wisely, stick to the tried-and-tested formula.

## Flirting zones – the SAS Test

Where are the hot-beds of flirting in Britain? Which environments, in this culture, are the most conducive to successful and enjoyable flirtation? Our field research on flirting over the past few years has focused specifically on this question, and we have now identified the key factors that make an environment 'flirt-friendly'. To determine whether a social setting is conducive to flirting, we apply what we call the 'SAS Test'. SAS stands for Sociability (by which we mean specifically the acceptability and ease of initiating conversation with strangers), Alcohol (an essential flirting aid, particularly among the naturally rather reserved and inhibited English) and Shared interest (environments in which people have interests in common, or a shared focus of interest).

Applying the SAS Test to a variety of situations and environments yields some results which are in line with common sense or common knowledge about suitable flirting zones (although it does help to explain exactly why these settings are conducive to flirting) but the Test also reveals some rather unexpected and surprising 'flirt-friendly' environments. For example, would you have known that racecourses are among the best flirting zones in Britain?

The SAS Test can be applied to any environment being considered as a potential flirting-ground – and using the Test can help mate-seekers to avoid time-wasting and expensive mistakes – but the following examples emerged as the best flirting zones in British culture:

### Parties

Parties, particularly celebrations, pass the SAS Test with flying colours. At some such events – such as office Christmas parties and New Year celebrations – flirtatious behaviour is not only socially approved, but almost compulsory, or at the very least expected.

This is because parties, celebrations, carnivals and festivals are governed by a special code of behaviour known to anthropologists as 'cultural remission' – a temporary, structured relaxation of normal social controls and restrictions.

'Cultural remission' may just sound like a fancy, academic way of saying 'letting your hair down', or 'letting off steam' but it is in fact rather more complex. 'Cultural remission' does not mean shedding all your inhibitions, letting rip and behaving exactly as you please. There are rules of behaviour at even the wildest carnival – although they may involve a complete reversal of normal, everyday social etiquette. Behaviour which is normally frowned upon, such as flirting, getting drunk or jumping in fountains, may be actively required, and prissy refusal to participate may incur disapproval.

## Drinking-places: pubs, bars and night-clubs

Obvious choices, you would think, but although public places where alcohol is served (such as bars, pubs, wine bars, etc.) pass two elements of the SAS Test – Sociability and Alcohol – they fail on the 'Shared-interest' factor. In pubs and bars, striking up a conversation with a stranger is acceptable (subject to certain restrictions, described below), but the lack of an obvious common interest means that one still has to struggle to think of something to talk about. Generic British etiquette provides a universally acceptable subject in The Weather (everyone in this country knows that 'Nice day isn't it?' is a conversation-starter, not a request for meteorological data), but the introductory process still requires considerable effort.

Still, one survey showed that 27% of British couples first met their current partner in a pub, and alcohol was voted the most effective aid to flirting by respondents in an earlier SIRC survey.

Flirting in drinking-places is, however, also subject to more conditions and restrictions than at parties. In pubs, for example, the area around the bar counter is universally understood to be the 'public zone', where initiating conversation with a stranger is acceptable, whereas sitting at a table usually indicates a greater desire for privacy. Tables furthest from the bar counter are the most 'private' zones.

As a rule-of-thumb, the more food-oriented establishments or 'zones' tend to discourage flirting between strangers, while those dedicated to drinking or dancing offer more socially sanctioned flirting opportunities. Restaurants and food-oriented or 'private' zones within drinking-places are more conducive to flirting at a slightly later stage of the courtship process, such as the first date – indeed, the giving and sharing of food is such an important part of this process that anthropologists have a special word for it: 'courtship feeding' (a term borrowed from zoologists, as feeding is an essential element of courtship among other animals as well).

Night-clubs are something of a special case among drinking-places. They score higher on the 'Shared-interest' factor than pubs and bars, as clubbers usually share a common interest in music. The problem of initiating conversation is in any case reduced by the volume at which the music is played, which restricts verbal communication to a few simple shouted exchanges, allowing clubbers to flirt mainly through non-verbal channels. These factors should in theory put clubs at the top of the flirt-zone league table, and indeed they are widely regarded as hot-beds of flirting, but recent research has uncovered a curious new trend among a significant proportion of young clubbers, who regard dancing as an asexual activity. Their focus is on group bonding, and the euphoric, almost transcendental experience of becoming one with the music and the crowd. These clubbers take great exception to any suggestion that they are there for the vulgar, crass purpose of

'pulling' – although it must be said that many of them do meet their sexual partners in clubs, so flirtation must clearly take place at some stage.

Although we have focused on heterosexual flirting in this study, many of the same principles (including the SAS Test) apply equally to homosexual flirtation. The gay participants in our focus groups all mentioned gay pubs, bars and clubs as prime flirting zones. In terms of the SAS Test, some interviewees felt that gay drinking-places had an advantage over other bars and pubs on the Shared-interest factor – as simply being gay automatically gave frequenters of gay bars at least something in common, and perhaps a sense of solidarity.

### The workplace

Although our survey showed that flirting to advance one's career is widely regarded as unacceptable, flirting between work colleagues is normal. Both flirting with intent and flirting for fun are common in most offices and other workplaces. Studies have found that up to 40 percent of people now meet their spouses or current sexual partners at the workplace, and some recent research findings indicate that flirting is good for relieving workplace anxiety and stress. The playful atmosphere created by flirtatious banter helps to reduce friction, and exchanges of compliments help to boost self-esteem.

A recent review of the research literature on 'office romances' reports mixed and somewhat inconclusive results in terms of their effects on productivity, with some studies finding that such relationships increase productivity and others finding the opposite, but it seems fair to conclude that providing it is handled with reasonable tact and discretion, office flirtation can help to create a happier and more relaxed working environment. Workplace flirting may be under threat from Puritanical influences imported from America (see below), but at the moment workplaces are still among the better flirting zones in this country. Technically, workplaces only pass two elements of the SAS Test, as alcohol is not commonly available in offices or factories, but in practice work colleagues tend to find opportunities to drink together – and workplaces score very high on the Sociability and Shared-interest factors. Training courses, sales conferences and other such work-related excursions and gatherings were highlighted by our focus-group participants as particularly conducive to flirting, combining all the benefits of common interests and ease of sociable communication with the added lubricant of celebratory drinking.

At the workplace itself, however, flirting is usually acceptable only in certain areas, with certain people and at specific times or occasions. There are no universal laws: each workplace has its own unwritten etiquette governing flirtatious behaviour.

In some companies, the coffee machine or cafeteria may be the unofficial 'designated flirting zones'. Some organisations may frown on any flirting at all during office hours, or between managers and staff, while others may have a long-standing tradition of jokingly flirtatious morning greetings. The unspoken rules can only be discovered by careful observation of colleagues and paying close attention to office gossip.

### Learning-places: schools, universities, colleges

Almost all educational establishments are hot-beds of flirting. This is mainly because they are full of young single people making their first attempts at mate selection, but they also pass all three elements of the SAS Test – like workplaces, they score particularly high on the Sociability and Shared-interest factors, and while alcohol is not usually served in classrooms, students have plenty of opportunities for drinking together.

The Shared-interest factor is particularly important to adolescents, who tend to be self-conscious, and often shy and awkward, lacking the polished social skills necessary to strike up conversations without an obvious point of contact. The shared lifestyle and concerns of students, and the informal atmosphere, make it easy for them to initiate conversation with each other. Simply by being students, flirting partners automatically have a great deal in common, and do not need to struggle to find topics of mutual interest.

Flirting is officially somewhat more restricted in universities and colleges than in, say, pubs or bars, as education is supposed to take priority over purely social concerns, but in many cases the difference is not very noticeable. Our focus-group participants felt that taking a course or evening class could provide opportunities for more relaxed, enjoyable flirting than frequenting bars and night-clubs:

*"In evening classes you're doing an activity so you have some already registered mutual interest, whereas at a bar the only activities are drinking and talking, and you often can't do much talking because it's too loud."*

Academic conferences are among the hottest flirting zones on the planet. Like business conferences, they score very high on all three SAS factors, but they provide even more opportunities for showing off. If the evolutionary psychologists are right, and the human brain is our equivalent of the peacock's tail – an extravagant but highly effective flirting device – then academic conferences, where humans exhibit their brain-power in an endless succession of seminars, lectures, debates and speeches, must be one of the most effective forms of courtship display.

### Participant sports and hobbies

Almost any participant sport or hobby can involve flirting, and all clearly score high on the Sociability and Shared-interest factors in the SAS Test – with the Alcohol element requiring

some deliberate effort rather than being built in to the activity itself.

Sports and hobbies are often thinly disguised excuses to 'meet people' (itself often a euphemism for flirting). This can mean that the level of flirtatious behaviour among members of a team or club tends to be inversely related to the standards achieved by participants and their enthusiasm for the activity. With some exceptions, one tends to find a lot of flirting among incompetent tennis players, unfit swimmers, cack-handed potters, etc., but somewhat less among more proficient, serious, competitive participants in the same activities.

The exceptions to this rule tend to be at the very top level of a sport, where the demands of the activity and the dedication required are such that fellow competitors may be the only available or suitable mates (which is why we often see top tennis players marrying other top tennis players, Olympic equestrians pairing with other Olympic equestrians, and so on).

For most ordinary mortals, however, it is worth trying to find out if the members of the team or club one is planning to join have burning ambitions to play in the national championships or win prestigious awards for their handiwork. For mate-seekers, looking for flirting opportunities, it is probably best to avoid these po-faced, dedicated, fanatical or anoraky groups, and seek out clubs full of happy, sociable under-achievers.

For a particularly effective flirting environment, however, choosing a sport that involves an element of risk or danger, or a pastime that is emotionally arousing (such as amateur dramatics) is highly recommended. There is a strong link between emotional arousal and sexual attraction. Risk and danger draw people together, and fear produces the same chemical (phenylethylamine – related to amphetamines) that floods through our veins in the early stages of infatuation. Experiments (one of which involved a wobbly bridge) have shown that people are more likely to be attracted to someone with whom they have shared a risky or frightening experience.

### Spectator events

While they have the advantage of providing conversation topics of mutual interest, and some achieve a reasonable score on the Sociability factor, most sporting events and other spectator pastimes such as theatre or cinema are not particularly conducive to flirting, as social interaction is not the primary purpose of the occasion, and social contact may be limited to a short interval or require 'missing the action'.

The most striking exception to this rule is horseracing, where all the 'action' takes place in just a few minutes, the half-hour interval between races is dedicated to sociability, and friendly interaction between strangers is actively encouraged by

racecourse etiquette. In fact, our own recent research on the behaviour of racegoers indicates that the 'social micro-climate' of the racecourse makes it one of the best flirting environments in Britain.

In addition to exceptionally high Sociability, and free-flowing Alcohol, the Shared-interest factor is enhanced by rituals which actually provide ready-made opening lines and props for flirtatious encounters. At the races, the ritual conversation-starter is "What do fancy in the next?" or "What are you on in the 3.30?" or some variation on this theme. This question is usually accompanied by a gesture using the racecard (a vital prop), in which the initiator holds up and indicates the appropriate page in his or her racecard, leans over to examine the racecard of the 'target', places his or her racecard alongside that of the 'target' or even brings the two racecards into brief contact with each other – a clear symbolic indicator of the social contact desired.

Although several other environments pass the SAS Test, racing is the only setting we have found which is not only open to anyone, and involves an element of risk (assuming one has a bet), but even has the advantage of a ritual conversation-starter that includes the word 'fancy'!

### Singles' events and dating agencies

Although singles' parties, clubs and agency-arranged dates pass the SAS Test, there is still an element of stigma attached to 'organised flirting'. Singles' events and dating agencies are regarded as somehow unnatural, too contrived, too artificial, lacking in the serendipity and spontaneity that ought to characterise romantic encounters. Many people are embarrassed to admit to 'resorting' to dating agencies or organised singles' parties: they feel it is undignified, an admission of failure. The truth is, however, that there is nothing at all unnatural or undignified about organised matchmaking. It is a practice which has been the norm throughout human history, and is still customary in most cultures around the world.

Across the world, and throughout history, young people have never been expected to undertake the difficult task of mate-selection unaided. Elders, family, clan leaders, shamans, village matchmakers and others have always been centrally involved in this process. In many cultures, your marriage partner is determined by kinship: a boy is expected to marry his mother's brother's daughter, for example, and that is that (this particular system is known as matrilineal cross-cousin marriage, if you want the official jargon, but there are many others).

Other systems are much less specific, and less rigid, but single mate-seekers are rarely left to fend for themselves: special dances and festivals are organised for singles to meet suitable

partners, individual introductions are arranged; nothing is simply left to random chance. With one minority exception: modern Western industrial cultures in the latter half of the twentieth century – a 'blip', an aberration, a bizarre period in which the strong kinship networks and close-knit communities which had always provided these matchmaking services became fragmented and unstable, and unfortunate mate-seekers were left high and dry.

Until, that is, the recent re-incarnation of traditional matchmakers in the form of dating agencies, singles' clubs, marriage bureaux, etc. All these organisations are doing is reviving a normal, essential social practice which we had temporarily lost. Instead of wise elders or village matchmakers providing introductions to suitable mates, we have experienced agents – using wise computers – searching for matches and organising parties. This is yet another case of human ingenuity, and modern technology, creating appropriate substitutes for essential traditional practices.

Sometime in the future, our descendents will look back on late-twentieth-century 'random mating' as a strange historical curiosity, and laugh at our brief, misguided, unsustainable attempt to manage without matchmakers.

### Cyberspace

Internet dating agencies perform much the same function as the other matchmakers, traditional and modern, described above, the only difference being the absence of a human 'agent' to perform introductions. Many ordinary dating agencies and singles' organisations rely on computers to search for matches, so online dating is not significantly more 'technological' than other methods.

Nor is flirting in cyberspace – whether through internet dating sites, chat rooms or email courtship – necessarily more artificial, unnatural, de-humanized or risky than flirting in what might be called 'realspace'. Cyberspace fails the Alcohol element of the SAS Test (although cyber-flirts can of course provide their own) but scores very high on Sociability and quite high on the Shared-interest factor. In cyberspace, unlike most 'realspace' public environments in Britain, striking up conversation with complete strangers is normal behaviour, indeed actively encouraged. Shared interest is ensured by joining a suitable chat room or choosing a prospective partner with similar interests from an online agency portfolio. Gay participants in our focus groups were particularly enthusiastic about this aspect of cyber-flirting:

*"It's not always that easy to meet other gay women, especially as I'm not too keen on bars and clubs. I've made a lot of good friends through gay sites – online you can get to know people better than shouting in a club."*

Although alcohol is not automatically provided in cyberspace, our research indicates that it may in fact be less essential to successful flirtation in this context than in other environments. In our focus groups and interviews, the 'disinhibiting' effect of online communication (and mobile phone text-messaging) is a recurring theme. Without exception, participants say that they express themselves more freely, with less reserve, in online and text communication than in face-to-face or telephone encounters.

*"I say things in emails that I would never dare to say in real life."*

*"That's right, you lose your inhibitions when you're online – it's almost like being a bit drunk."*

*"For me it's the same with texting. I read that lots of people are chatting each other up by text nowadays, and it's true. I can see why. You say things in texts that you would be too embarrassed to say to someone's face – or even on the phone."*

*"With email you have time to compose your thoughts; you can be much wittier, much more seductive. You tend to be more flirtatious than in real life."*

It seems particularly significant to us that so many of our interviewees and focus group participants contrast their online communication style with what they would (or would not) say 'in real life'. This curious slip provides a clue to the nature of the disinhibiting effects of online communication. It seems that William Gibson, who coined the term 'cyberspace', was right when he said of cyberspace that "it's not really a place, it's not really space". We regard cyberspace as somehow separate from the real world: our behaviour there is different from our conduct in 'real life'.

Cyberspace is treated as what anthropologists would call a 'liminal zone' – an equivocal, marginal, borderline state, segregated from everyday existence, in which normal rules and social constructions are suspended, allowing brief exploration of alternative ways of being. Liminality is characteristic of carnivals, festivals and rites of passage, where we are in a state of cultural remission, where normal social controls are relaxed, and roles and rules may be changed or even reversed. It is no accident that alcohol is universally associated with such festivities: the chemical effects of alcohol (inducing altered states of consciousness) 'mirror' the cultural chemistry of the carnival – the experience of liminality.

Perhaps because cyberspace is a new, strange and unfamiliar 'world', we treat it as a liminal zone, in which the normal social rules and constraints do not apply, and we can experiment with alternatives. Just as we abandon the conventional rules of spelling and grammar in our emails, so we ignore the social

inhibitions and restrictions that normally govern our flirting behaviour. We say things we would not say in 'real life'. This may explain why a recent study found that cyberspace friendships and romantic relationships form more easily and develop more rapidly than traditional 'realspace' relationships.

It is also worth noting that some of the fears about deception and misrepresentation in cyber-dating seem to be unjustified. A recent study, published in the journal *Computers in Human Behaviour*, found that although cyberspace does indeed offer greater opportunities for exaggeration and outright deception than traditional forms of interaction, the difference between misrepresentation in cyberspace and 'realspace' romantic relationships was not statistically significant. In the initial stages of flirtation, we all present an idealized and edited version of ourselves, whether we are online or in the 'real' world. One of our focus-group participants summed it up beautifully:

*"Flirting is like a CV: you tighten up your good points. But online is not really that different to meeting someone in a pub. Until you get to know someone well, you filter the information you give them."*

While many people find the alternative reality of cyber-flirting a liberating experience, it can have adverse consequences. Just as we may sometimes regret things we have said or done while under the influence of alcohol, we may also sometimes regret our disinhibited behaviour in cyberspace. The problem is that cyberspace is not in fact entirely separate from the 'real' world, any more than the office Christmas party takes place in a parallel universe. Excessively salacious emails, like office-party misdemeanours, may come back to haunt us. Because of the 'liminality effect', email feels more ephemeral and less binding than 'putting something in writing' on paper, but is in fact if anything more permanent and considerably less discreet.

Despite the caveats, cyber-flirting is undoubtedly here to stay. For the rather reserved and inhibited British, the benefits of the 'liminality effect' far outweigh any disadvantages.

### **No-go areas: trains, supermarkets, galleries, etc.**

We have outlined above the research evidence on the most flirt-friendly environments in Britain today, with some explanation of exactly why these settings are conducive to successful flirting. There are undoubtedly others. Our focus-group participants mentioned, for example, flirting in parks, traffic jams, gyms and libraries. We cannot cover all the possible flirting zones in this report, but the SAS Test is a useful tool which can be applied to any environment being considered as a potential flirting zone.

For example, some of the locations frequently touted by women's magazines and the popular press as suitable places to meet Mr or Ms Right – such as supermarkets, art galleries and commuter trains – begin to look less attractive when they fail

the SAS Test. Supermarkets, a magazine favourite, fail miserably on all three factors: they score very low on Sociability (it is not normal to strike up conversations with strangers in supermarkets), nul points on Alcohol (it is there, but no-one is drinking), very low on Shared interest and, as one of our focus-group participants pointed out:

*"The lighting is just not flattering"*

Trains suffer from the same unromantic atmosphere, and in Britain score below zero on Sociability, nil on Shared interest, and although alcohol is sometimes available, it is not enough to overcome the traditional English inhibitions about talking on public transport. Germaine Greer observed that "Even crushed against his brother on the Tube, the average Englishman pretends desperately that he is alone."

Art galleries (another media favourite, at least among publications aimed at the chattering classes) fail on two out of the three SAS factors: there is Shared interest, but no Sociability or Alcohol to help it along. Parks fail on all three factors (unless one is walking a dog, which provides an automatic Shared interest among the animal-loving English). Gyms have Shared interest, but fail on the other two factors. And so on. Mate-seekers can apply the SAS test themselves to any other location suggested by well-meaning friends, mothers, magazines or newspapers. As a general rule, if a proposed flirting zone fails on just one factor, it may be worth a try, as high scores on the other two can compensate. If it fails on two or more, forget it.

## **The future of flirting**

### **Flirtophobia: The influence of the 'new Puritanism'**

In some cultures, particularly North America, flirting has recently acquired a bad name – to the extent that flirtatious behaviour has even been officially banned in some workplaces and colleges in the USA. Sociocultural trends in America have a tendency to drift eastwards across the Atlantic, and SIRC's monitoring of these patterns has detected many signs of 'new Puritanism' influences in Britain. There is a risk that we may become flirtophobic – so worried about causing offence, being politically incorrect or sending the wrong signals that we will be in danger of losing our natural talent for playful, harmless flirtation. In the US, increasing numbers of companies and educational establishments are imposing authoritarian rules forbidding touching or any form of flirtatious conduct, although the research evidence indicates that this heavy-handed approach is unnecessary, and, to borrow a term from the environmentalists, unsustainable.

Attempts to forbid behaviours which are as deeply ingrained in the human psyche as flirting are doomed to failure. Our research indicates that the solution to sexual harassment is not

to ban flirting, but to teach people to be better at it, by which we mean, in particular, more sensitive to non-verbal signals and more skilled at conveying subtle messages with their own body language. One college's 'Code of Conduct' for students requires them to "seek and obtain explicit verbal permission for each and every increase in physical intimacy". This is quite ludicrous, as research on non-verbal communication has established that observation of reactions to subtle body-language cues will tell you everything you need to know. If the non-verbal response to your eye contact, moving closer or other signals such as a simple arm-touch is negative, there is clearly no point in asking "May I kiss you?" or even "May I hold your hand?" If the body-language response is positive, you progress cautiously, gradually escalating the level of intimacy only if you continue to receive positive responses, and backing off immediately if the responses are negative. If more people understood and followed such simple rules, there would be no need for misguided attempts to prevent sexual harassment by banning harmless flirtation.

### Matchmaking

Dating agencies are re-incarnations of traditional, and essential, matchmaking practices. They are here to stay, and will probably become more and more socially acceptable. We can expect to see new and different kinds of 'organised matchmaking', probably including a wider variety of singles bars, singles events and introduction agencies catering for specific social groups, interests, religions, tastes and sub-cultures.

This is because the problem with many of the current dating agencies is that they are too 'generic', too broadly inclusive. People naturally tend to be socially 'endogamous' – that is, inclined to marry within their own 'tribal' group: we tend to prefer to marry people of similar social background, people who are likely to share our tastes, values and interests. And research has shown that such marriages tend to be more stable and last longer than those between people from very different backgrounds. Dating agencies and other matchmakers should soon wise up to this, and develop 'brands' (as other industries have done) designed to appeal to much more specific groups.

### Cyber-flirting

The 'liminality effect' of cyberspace is particularly important for this somewhat reserved and inhibited culture. We predict that cyber-flirting will become more and more popular, not replacing but certainly complementing more traditional forms of mate-selection and courtship.

Cyberspace is particularly suited to the development of the more specialized dating agencies mentioned above, and the 'matching' systems of internet dating sites are becoming increasingly sophisticated. Perhaps one day, they will be as

wise and effective, and inspire as much trust, as traditional village matchmakers.

In some ways, cyber-flirting is also a return to a more old-fashioned style of courtship, in which prospective partners spent rather more time getting to know each other (and writing love-letters) before jumping into bed together. Anxious parents, who have a tendency to regard the internet, and indeed any new technology, as a pernicious influence on their adolescent offspring, should instead welcome this revival of traditional epistolary courtship

### 'Peter-Pan' Singletons

Singletons are also here to stay, and the prolonged-adolescence effect is likely to increase; perhaps, eventually, just as the 30s have become the new 20s, the 40s will become the new 30s. The current 'Peter Pan' culture is likely to persist for some time.

Marriage will, however, remain as popular as ever – in 10, 50 or even 100 years time, 90 percent of us will probably still get married, although the middle-class trend of later marriage – and delayed parenthood – may grow and spread to other social groups.

Some forecasters predict that the divorce rate will stabilize (although there is no natural reason why it should not increase still further: some hunter-gatherer societies have divorce rates much higher than those of industrialized cultures), but it is highly unlikely to fall, and the population will continue to age, so older, divorced singletons will become an increasingly significant group. Most divorcees re-marry, so agencies and other organizations helping them to find partners are likely to flourish and multiply.

### Taboos

The human species is addicted to rule-making. Every human activity, without exception, including natural biological functions such as eating and sex, is hedged about with complex sets of rules and regulations, dictating where, when, with whom and what manner the activity may be performed. Animals just do these things; humans make an almighty song and dance about it: this is known as 'culture' or 'civilization'.

Flirting is no exception, and while the specific content of our prescriptions and proscriptions may change, it is certain that there will always be rules. As jealousy is equally deeply ingrained in the human psyche, it is likely that flirting with someone else's partner – and 'extra-dyadic' flirting by partners in a pair-bond – will always be frowned upon, or at least subject to fairly strict controls, permitted only, for example, in specific situations or with certain specified categories of 'safe' people. We are, however, as prone to breaking rules as we are to making them, so 'extra-dyadic' flirting, adultery and all their

attendant troubles will continue to be a normal feature of our mating patterns.

### Female-initiated dates

It will be some considerable time before female-initiated dates become the norm – if indeed they ever do. More women are certainly taking the initiative and asking men out, but the majority are still very reluctant to do this, despite over three decades of blandishments and exhortations from 'liberated' magazines and self-help manuals. In any case, predicting the future is not just a matter of extrapolating from current trends – one must also look at the more deep-seated, hard-wired elements of human psychology, and ask whether any particular current trend is 'sustainable'.

In this context, we would predict that if (and it is a big if) female-initiated dates do become increasingly normal, males will find some other way of wresting back or maintaining an element of control – some substitute for the initiative-shift, the transfer of initiative to the male that seems to be an integral part of the human courtship sequence. We could be wrong about this. Female 'proceptivity' of a much more overt and explicit kind is, after all, the norm among our closest animal cousins. But it does seem to be associated with species whose mating patterns are tied to the oestrus cycle, which is not the case in humans. The question remains open.

### Self-help books, dating manuals, courses – and social scientists

One thing is certain: interest in flirting, and fascination with courtship techniques and the most effective ways of attracting and retaining sexual partners will never wane. Self-help books, manuals and courses on flirting, dating, courtship, sex and marriage will continue to sell, and novels dealing with these subjects (both wish-fulfilment romances and humorous depictions of the realities and pitfalls of sexual relations) will always be popular.

Social scientists like us will also continue to conduct research on flirting, feeding the insatiable demand for ever more detailed information on this vital subject. With or perhaps in spite of our well-meaning efforts, the flirting instinct will remain as strong as ever, and the species will survive.

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