

Waiting for the Train: Searching for a Mate in the Modern World

by Scott Stanley | @DecideOrSlide | May 5, 2016 9:02 am

In their book *Modern Romance*[1], Aziz Ansari and Eric Klinenberg focus on how people search for a partner, a date, or a mate in this hyper-connected era of having a seemingly endless number of options. *Modern Romance* is not for everyone (neither the book nor the reality it reflects). The book is written from the perspective of people who are smack in the middle of this new, unhooked, unscripted maelstrom of love, sex, and disillusionment. It captures how things are for a great number of people, not what many would say is ideal. It is insightful and irreverent. Ansari is, after all, a comedian with the bluntness of those who work the clubs.

Questions around how people search for, and find, partners are part of an entire field of study about matching problems. There is a need to match people to jobs, schools, and mates. From a societal level, there is benefit in maximizing the number of people who match with their best option. Individuals, of course, desire to make the best matches they can in order to increase their odds of personal happiness, fulfillment, and meaning.

You are likely familiar with a myriad of services that solve matching problems of less importance than the search for a mate. Uber, for example, matches drivers and riders. The algorithm to do this is, of course, simpler than whatever it would take to increase people's odds of lifetime love and commitment in marriage. A 15-minute lift is different from 60 years of driving together through life.

Ansari and Klinenberg describe massive changes since decades past in how people search for mates (or dates, or just sex). In mate selection, people have gone from choosing among two or three options in their neighborhood or apartment building to trying to search through and cope with the awareness of a myriad of options, thanks to advances in the digital realm.

Searches are likely to fall short of leading to good matches when people search too little or too much. What strategy is just right?

The Train Station Problem

Samantha (Sam, for short) is searching. She wants to find her soul-mate. I don't merely mean that she wants a mate who shares the deeper beliefs of her soul;¹ she believes there is this one perfect partner out there for *her* — someone who would complete her in ways far beyond being merely good, reliable, and committed. This is not an unusual goal in modern-day mate searching,² and it complicates things quite a bit.

Eli Finkel and colleagues have described the changing standards that guide our search for mates: "Throughout American history, the fundamental purpose of marriage has shifted from (a) helping spouses meet their basic economic and political needs to (b) helping them meet their intimacy and passion needs to (c) helping them meet their autonomy and personal-growth needs."³ Finkel and his coauthors argue that this expectation leads to average marriages being less happy, while a small number of marriages that can satisfy the expectations for personal fulfillment may be happier than the "best marriages in earlier eras." Sam wants

that.

Finding a soul-mate is not an unusual goal in modern-day mate searching, and it complicates things quite a bit.

Samantha is acutely aware of her dilemma. She has no foolproof way of knowing where to find “the one” or how to know for sure who is “the one” when she meets him. Metaphorically, Sam is in a train station trying to figure out which train to get on and stay on for the ride of her life.

Sam has checked out five trains. Those “checks” ranged from having a brief coffee meet-up with one guy she met online to being deeply involved with the last guy, whom she dated for 16 months before eventually deciding he was not the one. That’s a long train ride, and it left Sam further down the tracks at another station. Now she’s worried that she might have missed the best option during those 16 months. Serious involvement often has opportunity costs, you know. Still, she is a believing person, and she takes comfort in a faith that God will not allow her to miss the right train. Still, her belief in destiny is balanced by her belief that the odds are decreasing as time marches on.

Sam wonders if the perfect train has yet to appear at her station or if she’s missed it already. Her fear of missing the best train is palpable and even paralyzing. “What if I make the wrong choice?” “Am I even on the right rail line?” “How long do I stay on one train before I get off if I am not sure it’s the one?” “What if I leave one train and then, later, realize it was the best train for me?” A lot of the time Sam feels like curling up on a bench and just letting all the trains roll through the station without her even looking up.

Heuristics for Matching

Psychologists Peter Todd and Geoffrey Miller wrote about mate searching in a respected volume on simple heuristics for making the best decisions under various conditions of uncertainty.⁴ A heuristic is a mental short-cut that simplifies decision-making in order to achieve what is often a good-enough solution where the costs of further effort and time are unlikely to be worth the gain.

Todd and Miller describe some of the history of attempts to come up with the best heuristic to solve searching and matching problems in mate selection. They get to the heart of Samantha’s anxiety, described above, which is the “uncertainty that the next prospect that one encounters might be far superior to the best seen so far.”⁵ That is, she fears that once she makes a choice, the next train into the station would be the one.

Todd and Miller note that if you could know in advance the number of options you’d get to consider in choosing a mate, you could use a guideline that a number of studies suggest yields the highest likelihood of the best outcome. The rule is to select the best option that appears after you have considered 37 percent of the options. You can see why knowing the total number is important here, because otherwise, you’d have no way to even guess when you’ll hit that 37 percent point. Todd and Miller explain some of the arcane history of this decision rule, and they do a particularly nice job of describing the necessary assumptions for such heuristics to work.

Todd and Miller make a mathematical case for “satisficing,” or accepting an option that meets a reasonable level of expectation.

Suppose Sam is going to have 10 trains to consider in her life. By this rule, she should check out the first four but not choose any of them. Those poor guys don’t even know that they have no chance. Sam is tough and

she's working the rule. But starting with number five, Sam is ready to pick the first one that is better than any of the four she's seen so far. If the best option of all was in that first four, that's pretty sad. This may be, by the way, why people intuitively favor monitoring past partners through social media; it's become easy to do, and some people clearly believe that it increases their odds of recalling a train (if it's available) back to the station.

Let's suppose for a moment that the 37 percent rule is pretty good for selecting a mate. (I personally prefer a strategy that's a bit broader[2].) As Ansari and Klinenberg argue, part of the problem for today's young adults is that they are trying to cope with an awareness of a truly countless number of potential partners. While not actually true, a young adult today might think that the 37 percent rule means checking out hundreds or thousands of potential mates. That's going to take some time, even in Grand Central Station.

Let's bring sex into the equation. If a person believes that he or she needs to check out a lot of partners, including testing for sexual compatibility, that's going to add up to a lot of sexual partners before settling down in marriage. That strategy has numerous risks which I will not enumerate here. Galena Rhoades and I find that the median number of sexual partners emerging adults have before settling on a mate is around five or six, and that having sex with others in addition to the person one marries is associated (although, modestly) with lower marital quality.⁶ In a prior post[3], we attempted to explain why there could be something causal in that, net of all the risks a person already may have in their demographic background and life history.

Todd and Miller don't leave us at the 37 percent rule. They note that, even where all the assumptions are met, it only leads to the best solution 37 percent of the time. Their main focus is to make a mathematical case for "satisficing," or accepting an option that meets a reasonable level of expectation.⁷ For example, they argue that a 14 percent search rule (instead of 37 percent) gets 83 percent of people in the top 10 percent of their options. Contrast that with the people seeking absolute perfection, who may end up searching so long that they leave behind better options before finally settling on the last train to Clarksville.

The Misery of Searching for Your Perfect Soul Mate

As Todd and Miller describe, Frey and Eichenberger (1996) argued that people do not search adequately for a mate.⁸ The distinguished sociologist Norval Glenn also made this point in a chapter published in 2002.⁹ There are many causes of poor searches. One of Glenn's growing concerns was about how "premature entanglement" was common and could foreclose adequate search for good matches. Norval and I had a wonderful talk about these ideas over dinner in 2000. This was just after I had started thinking a lot about the inertia problem with cohabitation[4]. We both thought that a lot of people were increasing their odds of taking the wrong train when they did not have to do so. Thus, while there is increased freedom of choice and a growing availability of tools for searching, these factors may be offset by the growing trend toward sliding through relationship transitions in ways that lead to giving up options before making a choice.¹⁰

The increasing availability of tools for searching might merely increase fears of failing to find perfection.

You don't have to stay on a train for miles and miles to get a good sense for it. Many do, however, owing to the ease of entry into cohabitation. People slide into cohabiting,¹¹ which rapidly escalates inertia in the form of constraints; constraints make it more likely one will stay in a relationship regardless of dedication to it.¹² Of course, many others are foregoing serious romantic involvement altogether, being somewhat paralyzed by the fear of making the wrong choice. Why would that be? Although there are more tools than ever before that

could be employed to search for and sort into good matches, the expectations for marriage are also higher than ever. The increasing availability of tools for searching might merely increase fears of failing to find perfection; the quest may now appear both more possible and impossible at the same time.

Despite concerns in the late 1990s about inadequate search, I believe the changes Ansari and Klinenberg document are real, and that in just the past 15 years, people may have started to err in the direction of searching endlessly rather than searching too little. Of course, an endless search for the perfect mate is also, in a very real way, inadequate. Ansari and Klinenberg call attention to the work of psychologist Barry Schwartz (*The Paradox of Choice*[5]), who has written lucidly about the dilemmas of having too many options. This argument by Schwartz that they recount is brilliant.

By Schwartz's logic, we are probably looking for "the best" and, in fact, we are looking for our soul mates too. Is this possible to find? "How many people do you need to see before you know you've found the best?" Schwartz asked. "The answer is every damn person there is. How else do you know it's the best? If you're looking for the best, this is a recipe for complete misery."

That's a whole lot of train tickets. Schwartz points out that the very belief that you can find the perfect match at the end of a search sets you up to think there must always be something better—an option that you'd not seen or found yet—and this makes people less happy with what they eventually choose.

Commitment is making a choice to give up other choices. That's the deal. Believing that you could have found perfection—if you'd only searched a little more—will make it harder to commit to, invest in, and be happy with the person you married.

1. Wilcox, W. B., & Wolfinger, N. H. (2015). *Soul Mates: Religion, sex, love, and marriage among African Americans and Latinos*[6]. New York: Oxford University Press.

2. Even 15 years ago, most emerging adults believed that when it came to selecting a mate, it was most important that their spouse be their "soul mate." Popenoe, D., & Whitehead, B. D. (2001). Who wants to marry a soul mate? In D. Popenoe & B. D. Whitehead, *The State of Our Unions: The Social Health of Marriage in America* (pp. 6 – 16). Piscataway, NJ: National Marriage Project.

3. Finkel, E. J., Cheung, E. O., Emery, L. F., Carswell, K. L., & Larson, G. M. (2015). The suffocation model: Why marriage in American is becoming an all-or-nothing institution[7]. *Current Directions in Psychological Science*, 24(3), 283-244. doi: 10.1177/0963721415569274

4. Todd, P. M., & Miller, G. F. (1999). From Pride and Prejudice to Persuasion: Satisficing in Mate Search. In G. Gigerenzer, P. M. Todd, & The ABC Research Group (Eds.), *Simple Heuristics That Make Us Smart*[8] (pp. 287-308). New York: Oxford University Press.

5. Ibid

6. Rhoades, G. K., & Stanley, S. M. (2014). *Before "I Do": What do premarital experiences have to do with marital quality among today's young adults?*[9] Charlottesville, VA: National Marriage Project.

7. Simon, H. A. (1990). Invariants of human behavior. *Annual Review of Psychology*, 41, 1-19.

8. Frey, B. S., & Eichenberger, R. (1996). Marriage paradoxes[10]. *Rationality and Society*, 8(2), 187-206.

9. Glenn, N. D. (2002). A plea for greater concern about the quality of marital matching. In A. J. Hawkins, L. D. Wardle, and D. O. Coolidge (Eds.), *Revitalizing the institution of marriage for the twenty-first century: An agenda for strengthening marriage*[11] (pp. 45-58). Westport, CT: Praeger.

10. For more on this theme of giving up options before making a choice, you can read this piece[12] or listen to this 24 minute talk[13] I gave earlier this year.

11. Stanley, S. M., Rhoades, G. K., & Markman, H. J. (2006). Sliding vs. Deciding: Inertia and the premarital cohabitation effect[14]. *Family Relations*, 55, 499-509.; Stanley, S. M., Rhoades, G. K., & Markman, H. J. (2006). Sliding vs. Deciding: Inertia and the premarital cohabitation effect[15]. *Family Relations*, 55(4), 499-509.

12. Rhoades, G. K., Stanley, S. M., & Markman, H. J. (2012). The impact of the transition to cohabitation on relationship functioning: Cross-sectional and longitudinal findings[16]. *Journal of Family Psychology*, 26(3), 348-358.; Rhoades, G. K., Stanley, S. M., & Markman, H. J. (2010). Should I stay or should I go? Predicting dating relationship stability from four aspects of commitment[17]. *Journal of Family Psychology*, 24(5), 543-550.

Endnotes:

1. *Modern Romance*: <http://www.amazon.com/gp/product/B00OZ0TMYG/ref=dp-kindle-redirect?ie=UTF8&btkr=1>
2. a strategy that's a bit broader: <http://family-studies.org/how-to-lower-your-risk-of-divorce-advice-to-singles/>
3. prior post: <http://family-studies.org/practice-may-not-make-perfect-relationship-experience-and-marital-success/>
4. the inertia problem with cohabitation: <http://family-studies.org/why-doesnt-living-together-before-marrying-decrease-the-risk-of-divorce/>
5. *The Paradox of Choice*: <http://www.amazon.com/gp/product/B000TDGGVU/ref=dp-kindle-redirect?ie=UTF8&btkr=1>
6. *Soul Mates: Religion, sex, love, and marriage among African Americans and Latinos*: <http://www.amazon.com/Soul-Mates-Religion-Marriage-Americans/dp/0195394224>
7. The suffocation model: Why marriage in American is becoming an all-or-nothing institution: http://faculty.wcas.northwestern.edu/eli-finkel/documents/2015_FinkelCheungEmeryCarswellLarson_CDir.pdf
8. *Simple Heuristics That Make Us Smart*: http://www.amazon.com/Simple-Heuristics-That-Make-Smart/dp/0195143817/ref=la_B001IGOI3K_1_4?s=books&ie=UTF8&qid=1462405500&sr=1-4
9. *Before "I Do": What do premarital experiences have to do with marital quality among today's young adults?*: <http://nationalmarriageproject.org/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2014/08/NMP-BeforeIDoReport-Final.pdf>
10. Marriage paradoxes: <http://rss.sagepub.com/content/8/2/187.abstract>
11. *Revitalizing the institution of marriage for the twenty-first century: An agenda for strengthening marriage*: <http://www.amazon.com/Revitalizing-Institution-Marriage-Twenty-First-Century/dp/0275972739>
12. read this piece: http://slidingvsdeciding.blogspot.com/2012/04/here-we-go-again-more-passionate_17.html
13. listen to this 24 minute talk: <http://slidingvsdeciding.blogspot.com/2016/02/giving-up-options-before->

making-choice.html

14. Sliding vs. Deciding: Inertia and the premarital cohabitation effect:
<http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/j.1741-3729.2006.00418.x/abstract>
15. Sliding vs. Deciding: Inertia and the premarital cohabitation effect:
<http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/j.1741-3729.2006.00418.x/abstract>
16. The impact of the transition to cohabitation on relationship functioning: Cross-sectional and longitudinal findings: <http://psycnet.apa.org/index.cfm?fa=buy.optionToBuy&id=2012-11480-001>
17. Should I stay or should I go? Predicting dating relationship stability from four aspects of commitment:
<http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC2958669/>

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