Chapter 5: Dating and Mate Selection

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Learning Outcomes
At the end of this chapter you will be able to do the following.

- Apply the filtering theory of mate selection
- Define propinquity
- Differentiate between homogamous and heterogamous characteristics
- Define exogamy
- Apply the Social Exchange Theory to mate selection

Sixty years ago if you were of marrying age, you’d most likely select someone based on how your parents felt about it, how healthy the person appeared to be, how good/moral their character appeared to be and how stable their economic resources appeared to be. Today we search for soul mates. Look around you in the classroom. How many potential mates are sitting there? In other words, how many single females or males are there in the same classroom? Now of those, how many would you be attracted to as a date and how many can you tell just by watching them that you’d probably never date? These are the types of questions and answers we consider when we study dating and mate selection.

**Dating** as we know it developed in the 20th century. It is a practice in which people meet and participate in activities together in order to get to know each other. Prior to dating, courting was common in the United States. Courting, which involved strong rules and customs, evolved into dating due to widespread use of the automobile after the Industrial Revolution. Automobiles enabled young people to have more freedom. After the Industrial Revolution, with the change from agriculture and farming to support families to factory work, love rather than necessity became the basis for marital relationships. Today, dating is more casual than ever, taking on many forms (couple, group, online, etc.)

In the United States there are millions of people between the ages of 18-24 (18-24 is considered prime dating and mate selection ages). The U.S. Statistical Abstracts estimates that 9.5% of the U.S. population or about 15,675,000 males and 15,037,000 females are in this age group. Those numbers should be very similar after the 2010 Census data are analyzed which takes several years after collection. Does that mean that you could have 15 million potential mates out there somewhere? Yes, potential, yet no in realistic terms. You see, it would take more time than any mortal has in his life to ever interact with that many people. Besides dating and mate selection is not about volume it’s about quality and intimacy in the relationship.

When we see people we filter them as either being in or out of our pool of eligibles. **Filtering** is the process of identifying those we interact with as either being in or out of our pool of people we might consider to be a date or mate. There are many filters we use. One is physical appearance. We might include some because of tattoos and piercing or exclude some for the
exact same physical traits. We might include some because they know someone we know or exclude the same people because they are total strangers. Figure 1 shows the basic date and mate selection principles that play into our filtering processes (This inverted pyramid metaphorically represents a filter that a liquid might be poured through to refine it; e.g., coffee filter).

Propinquity is the geographic closeness experienced by potential dates and mates. It’s the proximity you might experience by living in the same dorms or apartment buildings; going to the same university or college; working in the same place of employment; or belonging to the same religious group. Proximity means that you both breathe the same air in the same place at about the same time. Proximity is crucial because the more you see one another or interact directly or indirectly with one another, the more likely you see each other as mates.

Attraction and the evaluation of physical appearance is subjective and is defined differently for each individual. Truly, what one person finds as attractive is not what others find to be attractive. There are a few biological, psychological, and social-emotional aspects of
appearance that tend to make an individual more attractive to more people. These include slightly above average desirable traits and symmetry in facial features.

Figure 1.5 Filtering Theory of Mate Selection.2
According to the Centers for Disease Control\(^3\) the average man in the United States is five feet ten inches tall and weighs about 177 pounds. The average woman is about five feet four inches tall and weighs about 144 pounds. Did you just compare yourself? Most of us tend to compare ourselves to averages or to others we know. That’s how we come to define our personal level of attractiveness. This is important to understand that we subjectively judge ourselves as being more or less attractive; because we often limit our dating pool of eligibles to those we think are in our same category of beauty.

If you are six feet tall as a man or five feet eight inches as a woman, then you are slightly above average in height. For men, if they have manly facial features (strong chin and jaw and somewhat prominent brow), some upper body musculature, and a slim waist then they’d have more universally desirable traits. For women larger eyes, softer facial features and chin, fuller lips, and an hour-glass figure facilitate more universally desirable traits.

So, here is the million dollar question “What if I don’t have these universally desirable traits? Am I excluded from the date and mate selection market?” No. There is a principle that has been found to be the most powerful predictor of how we make our dating and mating selection choices—homogamy.

**Homogamy** is *the tendency for dates, mates, and spouses to pair off with someone of similar attraction, background, interests, and needs*. This is typically true for most couples. They find and pair off with persons of similarity more than difference. Birds of a feather flock together, but you also have probably heard that opposites attract. Some couples seem to be a vast set of contradictions, but researchers tend to find patterns that indicate that homogamy in a relationship can be indirectly supportive of a long-term relationship quality because it facilitates less disagreements and disconnections of routines in the daily life of a couple. We filter homogamously and even to the point that we tend to marry someone like our parents. Here’s why; people from similar economic classes, ethnicities, religions, political persuasions, and lifestyles tend to hang out with others like themselves. Our mates resemble our parents more because we resemble our parents and we tend to look for others like ourselves.

**Heterogamy** is *the dating or pairing of individuals with differences in traits*. All of us pair off with heterogamous and homogamous individuals with emphasis more on the latter than the former. Over time, after commitments are made, couples often develop more homogamy. Some develop similar mannerisms, finish each other’s sentences, dress alike, develop mutually common hobbies and interests and parent together.

One of the most influential psychologists in the 1950-1960s was Abraham Maslow and his famous Pyramid of the Hierarchy of Needs\(^4\). Maslow’s pyramid has been taught in high schools and colleges for decades. Maslow’s pyramid sheds light on how and why we pick the person we pick when choosing a date or mate by focusing on how they meet our needs as a date, mate, or spouse. Persons from dysfunctional homes where children were not nurtured nor supported through childhood would likely be attracted to someone who provides that unfulfilled nurturing need they still have. Persons from homes where they were nurtured, supported, and sustained in their individual growth and development would likely be attracted to someone who promises
growth and support in intellectual, aesthetic, or self-actualization (becoming fully who our individual potential allows us to become) areas of life. It may sound selfish at first glance but we really do date and mate on the basis of what we get out of it (or how our needs are met).

**Theories of Mate Selection**

The *Social Exchange Theory* and its rational choice formula clarify the selection process even further. We strive to maximize rewards and minimize costs in our choices of a mate.

**Rewards – Costs = Choice**

When we interact with potential dates and mates we run a mental balance sheet in our heads. She might think, “He’s tall, confident, funny, and friends with my friends.” As she talks a bit more she might say, “But, he chews tobacco, only wants to party, and just flirted with another woman while we were talking.” The entire time we interact with potential dates and mates we evaluate them on their appearance, disposition, goals and aspirations, and other traits. This while simultaneously remembering how we rate and evaluate ourselves. Rarely do we seek out the best looking person at the party unless we define ourselves as an even match for him or her. More often we rank and rate ourselves compared to others and as we size up and evaluate potentials we define the overall exchange rationally or in an economic context where we try to maximize our rewards while minimizing our losses.

The overall evaluation of the deal also depends to a great extent on how well we feel matched on racial and ethnic traits, religious background, social economic class, and age similarities. The complexity of the date and mate selection process includes many obvious and some more subtle processes that you can understand for yourself. If you are single you can apply them to the date and mate selection processes you currently pursue.

Bernard Murstein wrote articles in the early 1970s where he tested his *Stimulus-Value-Role Theory* of marital choice. To Murstein the exchange is mutual and dependent upon the subjective attractions and the subjective assets and liabilities each individual brings to the relationship. The *stimulus* is the trait (usually physical) that draws your attention to the person. After time is spent together dating or hanging out, *values* (notions of what is desirable or undesirable) are compared for compatibility and an evaluation of the maximization of rewards while minimization of costs is calculated. If after time and relational compatibility supports it, the pair may choose to take *roles* (being a boyfriend, a wife, etc.) which typically include exclusive dating, cohabitation, engagement, or marriage. Figure 2 shows how the Stimulus-Values-Role Theory might overlap with a couple’s development of intimacy over increased time and increased interaction.

How do strangers transition from not even knowing one another to eventually cohabiting or marrying together? From the very first encounter, two strangers begin a process that either excludes one another as potential dates or mates or includes them and begins the process of establishing intimacy. *Intimacy* is the mutual feeling of acceptance, trust, and connection to
another person, even with the understanding of personal faults of the individual. In other words, intimacy is the ability to become close to one another, to accept one another as is, and eventually to feel accepted by the other. Intimacy is not sexual intercourse, although sexual intercourse may be one of many expressions of intimacy. When two strangers meet they have a stimulus that alerts one or both to take notice of the other.

**Figure 2: Depiction of Stimulus-Value-Role Theory with Intimacy and over Time & Interaction**

Judith Wallerstein’s book discusses a story where one woman was on a date with a guy and overheard another man laughing like Santa Clause might laugh. She asked her date to introduce her and that began the relationship which would become her decades-long marriage to the Santa Clause laughing guy. Many people discuss some subtle connection that just felt safe, like a reunion with a long lost friend when they first met one another. In the **stimulus stage** some motivation at the physical, social, emotional, intellectual or spiritual level sparks interests and the interaction begins. Over time and with increased interaction, two people may make that journey of values comparisons and contrasts which inevitably includes or excludes the other. The more time and interaction that is accompanied by increased trust and acceptance of one’s self and the other, the more the intimacy and probability of a long-term relationship.
Even though Figure 2 shows that a smooth line of increasing intimacy can occur, it does not always occur so smoothly or so predictably. As the couple reaches a place where a bond has developed they establish patterns of commitment and loyalty which initiates the roles listed in Figure 2. The list of roles is listed in increasing order of level of commitment yet does not indicate any kind of predictable stages the couple would be expected to pursue. In other words, some couples may take the relationship only as far as exclusive dating which is the mutual agreement to exclude others from dating either individual in the relationship. Another couple may eventually cohabit or marry.

It should be mentioned that what you’d look for in a date is often different from what you might look for in a spouse. Dates are temporary adventures where good looks, fun personality, entertainment capacity, and even your social status by being seen in public with him or her are considered important. Dates are short-term and can be singular events or a few events. Many college students who have dated more than once develop “A Thing” or a relationship noticed by the individuals and their friends as either beginning or having at least started, but not quite having a defined destination. These couples eventually hold a DTR. A DTR means a moment where the two individuals “Define the Relationship” openly to determine if both want to include each other in a specific goal-directed destination (i.e., exclusive dating) or if it’s better for everyone if the relationship ends.

Have you ever experienced one of these? Many describe them as awkward. A DTR can be awkward because of what is at stake. DTRs can be extremely risky in terms of how much of one’s self has to be involved and in terms of how vulnerable it makes each other feel. In the TV series The Office, Jim and Pam experience a number of DTRs that early on in the relationship ended with either or both of them wanting more closeness and commitment, but neither of them being capable of making it happen. The Office is fiction, but the relationships clearly reflect some of the human experience in an accurate way. Notice that Jim and Pam were from the same part of the country, had very many social and cultural traits in common, and both met in a setting where they could see each other on a regular basis and have the opportunity to go through the Stimulus-Value-Role (SVR) process. Homogamy, propinquity, need matching, compatibility, and eventually commitment all applied in their story together. The cultural similarities of a couple cannot be emphasized enough in this discussion.

Many of those living in the United States share common mainstream cultural traits, regardless of ancestral heritage or ethnic background, date and mate selection occurs for nearly all members of society. Figure 3 shows a list of cultural and ethnic background traits that influence how the inclusion and exclusion decisions are made, depending on how similar or different each individual defines themselves to be in relation to the other. Many who teach relationship skills in cross-cultural or trans-racial relationships focus on the similarity principle.

The similarity principle states that the more similar two people perceive themselves to be, the more likely their relationship will continue and succeed. Notice the word, perceive, because actual similarities are not as critical as an individual’s belief that there are common
characteristics. Also, certain individuals value one background trait over others. They may be more willing to overlook or ignore differences in traits which are not as similar.

**Figure 3: Cultural and Ethnic Background Traits**

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Language</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Religion</td>
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<td>Traditions &amp; Holidays</td>
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<tr>
<td>Lifestyles and self-identification</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Workplace skills</td>
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<tr>
<td>Educational aspirations and achievements</td>
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<tr>
<td>Age similarity</td>
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<tr>
<td>Physical appearance (skin color, facial features, &amp; body shape and size)</td>
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<td>Food preferences</td>
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<td>Political leanings</td>
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<td>Economic similarities</td>
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<td>Common shared experiences (IE: Military background)</td>
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<td>Family cultural similarities and compatibilities</td>
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<tr>
<td>Physical attractiveness similarities</td>
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<tr>
<td>Hobbies and interest similarities</td>
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<td>Life goals similarities</td>
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<tr>
<td>Others...</td>
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In the Movie, *My Big Fat Greek Wedding*, the Greek-American woman who was the main character meets a strikingly handsome professional man from a different ethnic background. Much of the difficulty she had in including him as a mate was her perception that her cultural and family background was unattractive and could not be desirable to potential mates. He was deeply attracted to her family because it filled his need for family connection, tradition, and support. He learned the Greek culture and adopted her family as his surrogate family.

In real life, most don’t make such profound concessions when choosing a mate. The relationship is less likely to develop if there are few or no common traits and more likely if there are more common traits, especially in the areas of commonality that the individuals define as being very important.

Dating often turns into exclusive or boyfriend-girlfriend type relationships. These relationships are crucial in the lives of young adults because they allow each other to gain experience in the daily routines of intimate relationships. They don’t always develop into long-term relationships, but practicing in healthy relationships is far more valuable than the grieving from breaking up.
There are some rules that can be summarized about how we include dates or mates in our pool of eligibles. Figure 4 shows that rule #1 is exogamy. Exogamy is the tendency to pair off with or marry someone outside of your own familial groups.

Rule #4 is to maximize homogamy and look for commonalities that will smooth out the daily adjustments of the relationship. It is doubtful you’d ever find a perfect match on all of these traits, but make sure you find a good match of complimentary personality traits and background characteristics.

Rule# 5 is very important. You must learn to discern trouble and danger in a date or mate. Intimate violence is the worst and most deadly violence especially for women. Their dates, mates, spouses, and life partners are more likely to cause them violent harm than will any other category of relationship in their lives. Figure 5 provides some criteria to identify as red flags, warning signs, or danger signs.

The risky and dangerous traits you might see in a potential date or mate can be early warning signals to raise red flags. In fairness, the presence of any one of these may just indicate a bad day. Some potential dates and mates are predatory. That means they search for types of people they can manipulate and control and try to pair off with them. The presence of a few of these could raise your suspicions enough to become a savvy shopper, discriminating consumer, or even a detective of danger signs. Remember, that when dating and selecting a mate overcautious discernment is justified.

Most people never experience the extreme dangers of dating. For most it’s more of an emotional risk than a safety risk. Many chose to marry and do so more often in the warmer months of the year than in the other months. When relationships form and engagements are made and agreed upon, an entire social experience is initiated where new social roles and networks begin to unfold. Engaged people announce their plans to family and friends and by so doing initiate a few processes within the social community of each fiancé.

Announcements of the engagement begin the process of exclusion of others. All other potential suitors and dates are excluded from the pool of eligibles while exclusive monogamy begins in almost every aspect of the couple’s lives. She often wears a ring that ranges from $2 to 10,000 dollars. That ring deters most because it symbolizes her agreement to marry her fiancé. The couple often formalizes their wedding plans in newspaper, mailed out invitations to the reception, and or online announcements. In-laws are people you become related to by virtue of marrying into your fiancé’s family network. It has been said that you get in-laws and out-laws when you marry. Not all in-laws will get along with the couple as well as might be wished.
The creation of extended kin ties is crucial to a successful engagement. To some degree in-laws are expected to at least be compatible with the new family member (fiancé) and if possible in another degree to establish close relational bonds. Engagement also signifies to the couple the ultimate direction of their courtship. Marriage and the merging of social networks, belongings, monies, physical intimacy, rights, children, and many other things becomes the focus. Engagement provides the couple with opportunities to practice being married, in many different aspects of the relationship.

Most engagements end in marriage. But, some end in a breaking up event where the marriage is cancelled. Sometimes couples realize that they were not as compatible as they originally thought themselves to be. Sometimes, they are geographically separated by various circumstances and find that their commitment did not withstand the test of time and space. Other times in-laws and extended family incompatibilities work against the marriage. And finally sometimes, people just fall out of love or lose interest.

For those who are searching for a spouse the market is an uneven playing field. The United States has what social scientists call a marriage squeeze. A **marriage squeeze** is a demographic imbalance in the number of males to females among those considered to be of marrying ages. There is also a phenomenon called the marriage gradient. The **marriage gradient** is the tendency for women to marry a man slightly older and slightly taller while men tend to marry a woman slightly more attractive.
Based on the U.S. Census there are about 15,675,000 males and 15,037,000 females aged 18 to 24. That boils down to 638,000 extra males in the marriage market 18 to 24 years old. Since women tend to want to marry a man slightly older the marriage market is squeezed because there are too few females for all the available males.

China and India have tremendous problems with their marriage squeeze issues. Because of sex-selection abortion, cultural preferences for males, female infanticide, and cultural definitions as female children being a burden rather than a source of joy and rejoicing they are missing tens of millions of females in these populations. For example, in 2001 India had 35 million extra men nationwide. In 2003 China was reported to also have about 35 million extra men.
3. www.CDC.gov