Men and Women on Dating and Gift-Giving: Same Planet, Different Worlds

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INTRODUCTION

This study is based on depth interviews concerning the dating gifts of predominantly heterosexual adults between ages 18 and 30. The focus of this paper is on the ways in which men and women differ in their views of this intersection of the material and the emotional. While there are within-gender variations in these meanings as well as areas of agreement between men and women, there is reason to expect systematic gender differences in views of dating gifts.

Expected differences in the views of men and women on the role of gifts and money in the dating process emerge in part from gender role stereotypes. For instance, as emotional work, gift-giving is traditionally seen as "woman's work," (Caplow 1982, Cheal 1988, Fischer and Arnold 1990, Sherry and McGrath 1989) and as something at which males are not expected to do very well. Cheal (1987) found that women are more active in all forms of gift giving and that men usually give gifts in "collaboration with a close female relative who does most of the gift work" (Cheal, 1988 p. 29). Cheal (1988, p. 175) attributes these differences to the domestic segregation of women, their exclusion from the capitalistic industrial work-force, and the importance to women's gender identities of maintaining familial ties. These gender expectations also help account for the predominant role of women in sending greeting cards and letters and in staging home celebrations of holidays that reinforce social and family ties (Caplow 1982, Di Leonardo 1987). On the other hand, providing money (including money for dates) is traditionally seen as "man's work," and as such, is something that women are not normally expected to do. Although gender roles and earning patterns are changing in U.S. society, these stereotypes still appear to exert a strong influence on the dating activities studied.

Another reason to expect gender differences in views of the role of gifts and money in dating derives from differing orientations toward dating and love by men and women. Belk and Coon (1991) describe the emergence of recreational dating from earlier models of courtship in America during the 1920s. Nevertheless, this recreational motivation in dating has been found, at least through the 1960s, to be stronger among men, while women have been found to be relatively more strongly motivated in dating by desires for courtship and status (Lowie 1951, Skipper and Nass 1966). Women were also found in these studies to be more emotionally involved with dating than are men. If such sex differences in dating orientations remain in our society, they could add to the weight of the traditionally more communal role of women (Cheal 1988) in accounting for the relatively greater importance women tend to attach to tangible symbols of interpersonal relationships (Baxter 1987, Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton 1981, Katz 1976).

It seems that a more romantic attitude toward love, commonly assumed to characterize women, might also help account for women's greater emphasis on the symbolic meanings of dating gifts. However, several studies using psychological response scales report that this stereotype is wrong and that men are more romantic about love and dating than are women (Fengler 1974, Hatkoff and Lasswell 1979, Hobart 1958, Kephart 1961, Knox and Sporakowski 1968). Despite these early findings, Kanin, Davidson, and Scheck (1975) report that:

"...ascribing 'more romantic' to one sex is a questionable practice. Both sexes are 'more romantic' if consideration is given to differential criteria of romanticism. If by 'more romantic' we refer to the speed of involvement and commitment, then the male appears to be more deserving of that label. If, on the other hand, we mean experiencing of the emotional dimension of
romantic love, then the female qualifies as a candidate for 'more romantic'” (p. 30).

According to both historical (Biegel 1951) and popular usage (Cancian 1986), it does appear that emotional or expressive motives are strongly associated with romantic love and that rational or instrumental motives in a relationship are seen as antithetical to romance. As Cancian (1987) argues, "The dominant definition of love in our culture is feminized. Love is identified with women and with qualities seen as feminine, such as tenderness and expressing feelings" (p. 5). While arguing for a more androgynous definition of love, Cancian (1987) recognizes that the dominant model of love corresponds well to a pattern of traits that are stereotypically feminine in American society: dependent, gentle, submissive, illogical, aware of others’ feelings, and expressing tender feelings. If these are the dominant characteristics of love, as popularly perceived, then it would seem to follow that 1) women may be more comfortable with being in love than men and 2) gifts intended to express love may also ideally share or express these characteristics. The latter expectation is expressed by Camerer (1988) who notes that gifts during dating are ideally economically inefficient and symbolize tenderness and caring (e.g., lavish flowers rather than cash).

If women should be more comfortable with romantic submissiveness in dating, then men should be more comfortable with exercising dominance and power. Rose and Frieze (1985) found evidence of this male power role in first date scripts generated by college students. Women "emphasized the private sphere (concern about appearance, conversation, and controlling sexuality),” and men focused "on control of the public domain (planning, paying for, and orchestrating the date).” This may be seen as a continuation of traditional dating guidelines. Furthermore, Harayda (1989) noted the woman’s continuing obligation to withhold sex and "bestow" it only as a special "favor" to the man she loves, and the man’s continuing obligation to pay for the date.

Korman and Leslie (1982) found that feminist ideology and female expense sharing was not associated with fewer reported cases of sexual aggression on dates. They conclude that "upholding feminist ideology may connote to males that one also adheres to a permissive sexuality...In fact, attempts by women to break the traditional male-only outlay of cash may provoke sexual advances as an outcome of male sex-role frustration.” Males, alarmingly, regard date rape as justified if 1) the woman asked the man out, or 2) the man paid all of the dating expenses or 3) the female is perceived as "loose or a teaser" (Muehlenhard, Friedman, and Thomas, 1985). A study by (Abbey, 1987) found that 23 to 40 percent of one college sample had misperceived the friendliness of another as being a sign of sexual attraction. The expectation of a fulfilling or enjoyable sexual relationship may well vary with perceived commitment. According to McCabe’s (1987) findings, "most women, however, enjoy sexual intercourse only when there is a greater level of commitment within the relationship.” Men are less involved with commitment and may view sex from a female as a gift and not as commitment.

Several studies have found that in personals advertisements for dates, men tend to offer financial resources and seek beauty and sexual attributes in women, while women tend to offer and seek the complementary set of traits (e.g., Bolig, Stein, and McHenry 1984, Cameron, Oskamp, and Sparks 1977, Harrison and Saeed 1977, Hirschman 1987). Similarly, Camerer (1988) suggests that the extravagance of a man’s gifts may show his sincerity in desiring a more permanent relationship:

"Consider an earnest young suitor, expecting a lifetime of familial production with his fiancée (given her consent); he will gladly "sink" the costs of a diamond ring and expensive dinners against the expected gains of joint production, if he must, to convince her of his intentions and elicit her cooperation. The lusty bachelor whose planning extends only to the dawn cannot afford such costly investments, ceteris paribus, since he expects less gain from a short-term relationship with his lady of that evening" (p. 183).

While this may seem an overly utilitarian and manipulative view of dating, it is just such a perspective that we expected to find among male informants. Women were expected to be more inclined to hold a romantic view of the dating process.
METHODS

This study is based on five pilot interviews, fifty depth interviews conducted by twenty five graduate students at the University of Utah, and reflective journals on dating kept by the same twenty five graduate students and thirty undergraduate students. Approximately one-third of those from whom data were collected were married or previously married. All data were collected using random identification numbers and an intermediary who recorded these numbers, in order to safeguard the anonymity of all informants. The self-report dating journal was based on a semi-structured agenda of research questions, designed by the authors, focusing on gift-giving, the role of money, and sex in the dating process. This semi-structured agenda was then modified and used as a guide for the depth interviews.

The informants are mostly white with few Asians, blacks or Hispanics. Mean age is twenty-seven with fifty-two females and fifty-eight males. Forty-seven additional undergraduates responded to two open-end questions: 1) what did you do on your first date, and 2) what are your most memorable or meaningful gifts. It should be noted that these results are based on a largely heterosexual sample in a conservative community and many are business students.

RESULTS

Views of the Dating Process

Men express a fear of the irrational emotions they believe are involved in romance.

"I think that kiss warped me for life. Sometimes when I see people kissing in movies or on TV I remember how I screwed up, once, and I get embarrassed all over again. My face even flushes. Good thing movie theaters are dark. I'm not warped in that I won't or can't kiss women. I've kissed, and I even figured out how to do it without screwing up." [M 30]

"I couldn't get her off my mind, and I only wanted to be near her. All of my rational thinking went out the window, and my emotions took over my thinking. That quarter was one of the toughest ever as far as academics was concerned, because every time I sat down to study all that I could think about was her...I have found out since, that it is much easier to think rationally about dating when your heart is not involved." [M 25]

One way of attempting to control these emotions is by treating dating and dating expenditures as something as functional as buying consumer goods. As one male reported:

"In its crudest sense, dating is very much like buying a car. You do 'comparison' shopping just like you would if you were buying a new car. You take so many test drives to help determine what make and model is appropriate for your wants and needs and then finally consummate a purchase. Occasionally you get to take a spin with a Ferrari, other times you're stuck with a Yugo. Just like car manufacturers offer different incentives to get consumers to buy one brand over
another men and women market themselves in different ways as THE brand to have. I knew girls who had a 'Have you driven a Ford lately' style of promoting themselves in that they thought a date with them would convince you to have no other. Other, and oftentimes more popular, girls, would offer 'rebates' in the form of reciprocated sexual favors for every 'purchase' (date) made by a guy. These types would often get test driven several times but not often taken home for keeps."

[M 30]

Similar male metaphors of woman-as-car are reported by Bailey (1988, pp. 69-70). Nor is this commodity view a new one. In Thomas More's 16th century Utopia, he compares choosing a wife to buying a horse (Whyte 1990, p. 40).

Women, especially the younger women studied, more often describe the pure enjoyment of being swept up in a romantic relationship. They recognize emotion in dating and love, but are more inclined to welcome than fear it.

"Romance is great. It's fun to get swept up in the moment." [F 24]

"It [love] isn't something you look for. All of a sudden you notice it's there. It just kind of dawns on you. It doesn't build up, it's either there or it's not." [F 21]

"Love is a very special and lasting feeling that only comes around a few times in a lifetime." [F 22]

"Love can make you forget everything that's wrong with the world. It can make you the happiest person alive. And it can hurt you with such a passion that you think you are going to die! Love is consuming...I think the most fascinating characteristic about love is that it never dies. Granted, it does grow stronger and weaker, but I truly believe that it never totally goes away. I really believe that. Then again, I'm a romantic." [F 25]

Among older women, however, there tends to be a less idealized view of dating and romance.

"I always thought that when I fell in love it would be complete with fireworks and violins and I would be completely starry-eyed. I was waiting to be swept off my feet because that's how it happened to my friend Jenny. Jenny began dating her husband in November and knew immediately that he was the one. The way they acted when they were together was almost disgusting. Everytime Joe walked into the room Jenny would gasp. Jenny saw fireworks and the whole bit. They were married within six months of their first date. I always thought it would happen to me like that, but it didn't. Love and realizing that I was in love was very confusing because I hadn't heard the violins or seen the little cupids floating around my head. So I asked my friend Amber who had been married for a year. She assured me that she had never seen the fireworks the way Jenny had, but she knew that she loved her husband...This is the way it has been for me. Love wasn't the hot, fiery romance that I expected, but rather a calm, peaceful feeling and a reassurance that I had found the right one." [F 24]

"I guess it was because I had this fairy tale idea, you know. You're going to meet this guy, this one guy, and you're going to fall in love, get married, have kids and live happily ever after. And about that time I figured out it was all shot to hell. I don't believe now that there is only one guy, one certain person. I believe now that you can be happy with a lot of different people...I used to think "Oh my god, I hope it's not that person." And finally, like slap me upside the head, I realized that there were a lot of guys that I would be perfectly happy with out there." [F 29]

VIEWS OF DATING GIFTS

Such feelings are played out, especially in early stages of a relationship, through gifts. Our informants have given and received such varied gifts as: "a box of horse manure," a "sweater and a bracelet," "flowers," "vacations," "practical things we need," "imitation perfume," "myself," "time," "teddies," "body lotion," "sex," and "one hell of a good time." Obviously, gifts come in all shapes, colors, prices, types, and smells. Gender differences are highlighted in both the choices and meanings of these gifts.

Time expenditure in selecting gifts is found by Fischer and Arnold (1990) to be greater for women with traditional gender role attitudes and men with non-traditional gender role attitudes. Among our female informants, a gift has more value if it is perceived to have taken time to find, implying that the giver was thinking of the other. These women see time as a reflection of
commitment to a relationship. Contrast the following male informant who values time more than money.

"I have helped a couple of girls move and that was really a gift. I don't want to do that again. I would rather spend money than move." [M 29]

The women studied are more involved in gift selections and more willing to devote time to gift shopping.

"If it's someone you love with all your heart, you spend a little more time...To find the perfect gift." [F 34]

Researcher: "She spends a lot of time finding the "right" gift for someone. This is very important to her. She thinks about the gift, this makes it 'much funner.'" [F 31]

The profane quality of money (Belk and Wallendorf, 1990) can be made sacred through an expenditure of time and the enactment of appropriate gift-giving rituals. An instrumental gift, such as cash, lacks the expressive emotional quality desired in a gift. This failing is illustrated by blunders such as the following:

"A gift that was bought in a rush for something like a birthday is an insult. You have to take time off work and find them the gift. You have to think about the person when you're not with them. He forgot my birthday and gave me a card the next day that said he was sorry. Inside was six hundred dollars, which is a lot of money. I gave it back and said, 'You just don't understand. You didn't even take the time to get me a gift.'" [F 24]

If cash can seem a crass and inadequate substitute for the giver's time, money spent on a trip that is enjoyed together can have the opposite effect. Mementos of these trips were also important to women interviewed.

Researcher: "She feels that personally produced gifts have an added value or sentiment, especially if they involve experiences or places where you went with a date. She has also made a quilt for a date with material came from a trip they took together." [F 34]

"In those two relationships I learned to appreciate travel, both domestically and internationally, as my most favorite form of gift-giving." [F 36]

Men are inclined to regard travel in a more utilitarian way and to be oblivious to the meanings of these souvenirs.

"I like to travel and frequently take dates for weekend trips or on holidays. It is a good way to really get to know someone. Sometimes we buy knick-knack kinds of things along the way thinking that they will be reminders of the good times. Usually I ended up throwing these things away." [M 30]

Males attach a functional symbolic meaning to the experience of travel. It is viewed as an opportunity to become acquainted with the female and judge her compatibility.

"I have had the opportunity to travel with Jill and see how we act on a one to one basis without outside pressures and problems. The trips that we have taken together have only helped our relationship." [M 32]

For most of the women studied, gift buying is ideally a spontaneous expressive act rather than an instrumental act. It is a sign of commitment to a romanticized relationship because it shows that the recipient was in her thoughts.

"I might be out shopping, spot something, and buy it immediately. Just because I thought it's something the person might like. To make them feel that you think about them." [F 25]

"They're surprises; you can't plan on gifts. Gifts, yes you have your special occasions, but gifts are basically spontaneous. You see something that you know is just perfect and you know that it's just perfect for your date, you buy it, you can't plan. You might walk past an isle and it just jumps out at you, you got to get one, you just got to have it." [F 25]

Male gift-giving, by contrast, is often reduced to special occasions only, especially as time progresses in a relationship.

"I have heard that romantic gifts are not given often a few years after marriage because you share the same budget and the gift costs her too. The wife may feel that it could have been spent better on something practical. It probably
wouldn't be normal for a couple that has been married for many years to give flowers and date in a courtship manner, so I believe married people wouldn't find gift-giving fits into their role as a spouse for many gifts as a single couple may." [M 25]

"Dinners are the ultimate first date, but the longer that you stay together and go out, the less that you spend on dinners. Instead, the girl makes you a dinner at her home or yours." [M 23]

"Men always start with expensive gifts, like dinner and flowers, at least for the first date. The longer that you have dated a girl, the cheaper the gifts become. There is a marginal rate of return on the gifts that you give to your dates. So, you give less as time goes on." [M 30]

"I used to give her more. I used to try and impress her more, but now I feel pretty confident of our relationship. Maybe I should be more romantic. I used to be." [M 29]

Nevertheless the women studied believe gift-symbalized romance should not be allowed to die and desire spontaneous gifts in a continuing romantic relationship.

"I got an Epilady for Christmas this year because that's what I asked for. I had hoped for an additional, more romantic gift, but hadn't really expected it." [F 35]

"At Christmas I expected something very romantic because we had been dating for almost nine months. Kyle bought me two sweaters and three lumps of coal (from Santa). I had expected something more personal like the painting I bought him." [F 23]

These informants' perceptions of the diminishing role of spontaneous romantic gift-giving from a man supports Fengler's (1974, p. 138) conclusions that "while the male can afford to be romantic before marriage this is a luxury only the female can afford after marriage."

The more romantic ideal of women is also seen in that most stereotypical of dating gifts: flowers (see Scammon, Shaw, and Bamossy 1982). Several women remembered flowers as their most memorable gift. None of the males remembered flowers as their favorite gift.

"There is a curious phenomena when it comes to one type of gift: flowers. No matter how much I try not to give in to the traditional image of the woman swooning to this ploy, flowers do something to me, especially roses." [F 24]

"He gave me three roses: one for love, pink for friendship, and white for trust. These meant a lot to me.' She likes dinners and flowers for the perfect first date." [F no age given]

"He sent me a rose one day and a couple of days later a beautiful azalea. It meant very much to me because we were separated at the time and I missed him very much. Since, he had not given me anything before that time, I felt that now I was important to him and obviously he thought of me while we were apart." [F no age given]

Several female informants would give a man flowers, but one woman felt that while they are a meaningful gift to women, flowers aren't emotionally salient to men.

"I wouldn't hesitate to buy a man roses. Men don't put the emotional potency to gifts that women do." [F 35]

MONETARY VIEWPOINTS

As with time expenditures, most female informants consider the monetary value of the gifts they receive as an index of the man’s degree of seriousness about the relationship.

"I felt that the more money I spent on him, the more it meant I loved him. And I expected him to know that. I translated his expensive gifts the same way." [F 25]

"A 14k gold serpentine necklace; I knew that he liked me a lot and it was expensive and that I was worth spending that much money on early in the relationship. It meant a lot to me." [F no age given]

Researcher: "Does the value of a gift reflect the degree of affection that goes along with it?"

Informant: "Yes, if it's from someone who doesn't have a lot of money, it's harder to tell if they have a lot of money." [F 35]

Men were more likely to see their expenditures as
an investment—a feature found by Bernard and Adelman (1990) as well. They are worried about wasting money and are concerned with getting some form of return, often, but not always sex.

"While I was dating, I 'guarded' my wealth for the future and felt that giving expensive gifts was risking the future on the present. I didn't want to waste money and time on someone that wasn't going to be an important part of my life in the future. Once I got engaged, things changed considerably. I started giving my fiance, and later my wife, many gifts of considerable value from my funds in savings, because then I knew that she was going to be the most important part of my future life." [M 24]

"It has to be just the right gift, because they will tell you that they like it even if they don't. It would be a waste of money." [M 25]

"Dating is an investment. You put something in and you get something out. He dated his wife for several months before they were married and he had paid for virtually everything. When a woman pays, she is investing also. Both man and woman should invest in the relationship." [M 29]

"I guess my biggest dating gift was a car. Of course, I was engaged at the time so I'm sure he thought it was an investment in our future. I found the car I wanted within a certain price range ($3000-$5000), and he brought a cashiers' check to the place." [F 35]

These fears of wasting money are paralleled by male fears of wasting time and energy on a relationship.

"Some people actually enjoy doing this [dating] on a weekly basis. To me this is an extreme waste of time. I agree that this is sometimes a necessary step to take once in order to meet someone, but there are alternative ways to meet people." [M 23]

"I was always the person initiating. In the beginning and during the relationship, it was my energy being used and squeezed, and I just got tired of it." [M 24]

Besides fears of poor investments, men also worry that giving too much may influence the future expectations of a would-be wife:

"For example, if I would have showered luxurious gifts upon my dates, including my wife-to-be, I would have built up a huge level of expectation of monetary value spent, which expectation would have to be carried forward continually and perhaps escalated, or shattered in a most undesirable way. All I can say is thank God that I learned that lesson before I got married! Spoiling someone, whether it is a date or a kid, just leads to exorbitant expectations in the future." [M 24]

"Many guys feel that they need to spend a lot of money on dates in order to impress the girl they are dating. In turn the girls become accustomed to this kind of treatment and often are disappointed when the opposite occurs." [M 23]

These pragmatic views echo Carol Gilligan's (1982) conclusions that whereas males approach moral dilemmas as problems to be solved, females approach these situations as human relationships to be attended.

Men also worry that women will exploit them for their money, so that their investment will have "gone bad."

"The more I took a girl out and felt good about our long term relationship the more I was willing to spend on her. Men have to be careful about spending money on women; you may spend hundreds of dollars on a girl in a couple of weeks and then BAM, she decides she doesn't like you anymore. I view money and dating as an investment. You want to get a marginal return on the dollar." [M 25]

Rucker, et al. (1989) also find that out of this apparent concern men underestimate the cost of women's gifts to them. Similarly, men tend to use price equality as the basis for estimating gift-giving equity, whereas women are more apt to consider the happiness these gifts bring to the recipients (Rucker, et al., 1991).

"I think that the relationship didn't work out because she was very materialistic." [M 24]

"We took a trip to San Francisco once and kept a list of everything that was spent and who spent it. This was the only way to avoid war. Everything had to be EQUAL." [F 26]
SEXUAL EXPECTATIONS

The male stereotype of sexual expectations after gifts or expensive dates is supported throughout our data.

Researcher: "I asked George if he expected a girl to be sexually intimate with him after giving her an expensive gift. He said he definitely would. He said it may not happen but he expected it from the girl." [M 26]

"I am not sure whether to consider sex a gift or not. It has definitely been the main reason for dating up to this point in my life...My idea of dating can be summed up in one phrase: "I wonder if I am going to get lucky tonight?"...My main purpose for dating has been to have some fun and, whenever possible, to relieve some sexual tension." [M 26]

Researcher: "He stated that monetary gifts are quite often used as "fiscal foreplay" wherein the man expects to receive sexual favors in return for an expensive gift or after a night out." [M 30]

Researcher: "Eric believes that once a couple has sex the man is expected to pick up the tab." [M 31]

Yet, not all men share the view that gifts buy sex.

"It's disgusting to expect sex from a date just because you bought them dinner, but I know of guys who think they deserve to have sex in return for a nice date." [M 29]

Women acknowledge the attached sexual implications of accepting gifts. A gift carries an expected emotional commitment for both the giver and receiver.

"There was no way to remove the underlying sexual implications." [F 35]

One informant described her date's sexual expectations and her right to violate them:

"I was in love with another I had been asked by a guy I found vaguely interesting (wholesome and kind but not too exciting) to go with him and another couple on a camping trip to Baja California. Even though I was less interested in this fellow since meeting my future husband a few weeks earlier, I did not change my mind about the trip. I let him pay for most of it, enjoyed his company and was reasonably affectionate throughout the five days, but I did not make love to him. I knew he was dismayed, but he never had the courage to question my behavior. Meanwhile, I snuck away at least once and wrote a postcard to my future husband and told him what fun I was having." [F 37]

CONCLUSIONS

Men are more likely to see love as either an irrational emotional condition that is feared or as a non-emotional investment decision. Women--especially those who are younger and have never been married--are more likely, instead, to see love as an agreeable emotion that, like their ideal man, should sweep them away. Women are more likely to see dating gift-giving as an essential communication of love and they often attempt to assess the intensity of a partner's love by the gifts given and the time devoted to selecting such gifts (Belk and Coon, 1991). Men are more inclined to see gift-giving as less important, worry that dating partners' expectations for gifts are merely reflections of materialism, and view time spent in selecting a gift--as something they seek to minimize. Women are more spontaneous and also equate gift selection effort with romantic commitment. Men may initially splurge on dating gifts, but eventually come to view gift-giving as obligatory and burdensome.

Our data also support the view of gift-giving as "women's work," and as something at which males often fail to do well (especially as a relationship matures and turns to marriage). Women have a romanticized ideal of finding a perfect inspired gift and are willing to spend the time necessary to find the perfect gift. Men are viewed as lacking the talent or desire to spend the time to find the perfect gift. Romanticism is seen by men to inexorably slip toward obligatory exchanges of gifts at birthdays, anniversaries, and holidays.

This study has shown that a dating gift is a communication medium through which stereotypical gender-roles and gender-identities are enacted and codified. As such, further investigation of this phenomena cross-culturally would be especially useful in cultures with differing gender roles. This includes different
regional cultures as well as different national cultures. Changes over time will also be important to monitor as gender roles continue to change.

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