

JMUse Café  
“Cupid’s Arrow: Can Science Predict Trajectory?”  
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The title of tonight’s discussion is appropriate and, for the sociologist, easily answered. Can science predict the trajectory of Cupid’s arrow? Pretty much. My remarks tonight will highlight how that happens.

Unlike what many think (or perhaps hope), the arrow that cupid aims does not soar to a “fated” target, where the “right” ONE for you is waiting. Rather, from a sociological point of view, the arrow is strongly steered (by family, culture, friends, media, etc.) toward one “kind” of target where the person who occupies the bull’s eye appears to be the only “he” or “she” who could have. Cupid in this sense is no fickle god out for a mischievous good time, but merely the people and ideas of your social worlds who encourage you to love one person and not another.

While there are many kinds of love we participate in -- platonic love for our friends, love for our family members, love for our pets, love of our favorite kind of ice cream, love of god(s) - - the subject tonight is romantic love and, as a member of Western society, we have well-learned that romantic love is the most important kind of love there is. Poets, essayists, songwriters, and the like focus a great deal of attention on this emotion. In the West in particular, romantic love is something that we should strive for and, if we come up short, we are likely to spend some time feeling like a failure. Thank goodness we have Valentine’s Day to remind us of this.

While love is a “universal psychological potential” (Goode 1959), meaning that love can be found across societies and cultures, the degree to which it is revered as an important emotion that must be attached to the choice of life mate/partner varies to a great extent. Expressions such as “love sickness,” “crazy in love,” “mad about you,” highlight the disruptive effects love relationships can have on one’s life. We romanticize “love sickness”, but in ancient Greece it

was literally thought to be a sign of madness, a view which pervaded medieval commentators in Europe. For example, in France in the Middle Ages, love was thought to be a “derangement of the mind,” that could be cured by sexual intercourse (either with the person you were in love with or someone else). “This cure assumed, as Oscar Wilde once put it, that the quickest way to conquer yearning and temptation was to yield to it immediately and move on to more important matters” (Coontz 2005: 16).

Until about 300 years ago, romantic love was not believed to be an important component of and certainly could not be the basis for marriage. In fact, in many societies across the globe, romantic love was thought to make one dangerously emotional and irrational. A marital union was too important to have such a flimsy basis (see Coontz 2003). It wasn't until children can earn a living detached from their families that the association between love and marriage could begin to be contemplated. Thus, changes in the economy structure how we are to think about love, as do changes in the culture. When philosophically, constitutionally, we believe in the individual “pursuit of happiness,” elevating love's association with lifelong attachment isn't far behind. So, though romantic love has existed for thousands of years, romantic loves attachment to marriage is relatively new.

Certainly today, we have a socialization process which predisposes us to romantic love and its importance. The “romantic love complex” (Goode 1959) in which we grow teaches us that falling in love is highly desirable, and further that any lifelong union without it is destined for disaster (though all too often the opposite proves to be the case). Romantic love, specifically heterosexual love, has been institutionalized. That is to say, we have been instructed that heterosexual love is the primary relationship we should be concerned with, the one that will place a shadow over all others, that will be the most important one of our lives, and that will

make us a complete person. “All will be right with the world” if we just marry an opposite sex partner (see Ingraham 2009). It is almost impossible to escape this message and my students can list with no trouble at all songs, t.v. shows, movies, magazines, websites, and the like that promote this message on a regular basis. While the strictures against cultural depictions of gay romantic love are weakening, Kurt and Blaine on the show Glee are the exceptions and not the rule.

Thus, society structures love through an economic system that can encourage or stifle it, political ideas about individual choice and happiness, and a socialization process that instructs us that romantic love is the most important emotion we will experience in our lives.

Given this, what of Cupid’s Arrow? If I am *free to choose* my lover, than *this* must be the part of the equation that is left to “fate”, that society must not control. Au contraire. In societies like ours, choices in a love match are only “formally free.” Parents and peers, our location in the social structure (particularly our social class) restrict the possible mates that are even allowed to swim in the same pool. Early on, our parents decide who we are allowed to play with, who we can invite to parties; our parents instruct us about the “right kind” of people, even if those words are rarely used. As sociologist William Goode noted, one could say that “love must be controlled *before* it appears” (1959: 43). We are often unaware of this control; we do not feel constrained. Thus is the power of our society – its influence lies beyond what we normally imagine. But, it is hard to deny that the neighborhood we live in, the schools we go to directly affect with whom we will interact.

Thus, it is no accident that people are homogamous in their choice of romantic partner. People tend to become intimate with people like themselves – around the same age, the same race, the same religion, the same level of education. If there is only one person for everyone, it

is odd that that person almost always resides in the same country, or ended up at the same university, or working at the same place. If that ONE person is waiting for me, and vice versa, across the globe in Indonesia, then it is unlikely that we are going to meet at all, let alone at my neighborhood grocery store as we peruse the cantaloupes.

As individuals, as much as we believe in cupid's arrow *piercing* the one we are *fated* to be with, we put a lot of energy in attracting the sort of person *we want to be* with and manufacturing emotions when we think we have found the *right* ONE. Most Americans participate in what sociologists call a "marriage market;" for our purposes we can make this less exclusive and call it a "love market." Like other markets, in this one people exchange goods and services, but here the goods and services include one's physical attributes, financial status, occupation, values/attitudes, sense of humor, etc. We exchange what we have to offer to others who may be looking to buy. We compare one product with another that we've used before.

College can often be a prime place to participate in a "love market" and, for some, a "marriage market." But, I wonder, what of romantic love in a hook-up culture?

The area where we clearly see the market in action is in the number of dating websites and personal ads. While college students often have a difficult time imagining being "desperate" enough to go there, millions of people do. Aside from designating your preferred education level, feelings about children, and whether or not you would date a smoker (a veritable road map for cupid's arrow), fate doesn't seem to have a lot to do with it when, if you're a golf lover for example, you can advertise for your "perfect" ONE at [www.golfmates.com](http://www.golfmates.com); if you are into Goth, you can search for love on [www.gothicmatch.com](http://www.gothicmatch.com); or if you've got a thing for firefighters you can try [www.singlefirefighters.com](http://www.singlefirefighters.com).

Do not despair, romantic love is no myth. It exists. But it is also highly controlled and structured by our social worlds, and thus highly controlled by ourselves. We internalize the ways of our societies; thus we are at the same time a captive to and a creator of our love match.

Talking to a sociologist about love is akin to sucking the romance right out of it. This can be a little depressing. Maybe it is best we move on to more poetry and Professor Stewart's remarks. In the meantime, I hope I've given you some things to think about.

#### Works Cited

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