

The Economics of Dating and Mating

An economic model has two components:

1. Preferences – What is desirable in a mate?
2. Constraints – Who finds you desirable?

How can you find someone who is both wonderful and willing?

Constraints affect both:

Equilibrium: Who marries whom?

“Competition” in the marriage/
partnership market determines the
matching we observe.

Individual behavior: What is your search strategy?

People recognize that they can't have
anything they want and that searching
is costly, and these constraints affect
their dating behavior.

A Market for Partners

(Note: This discussion follows England and Farkas, pp 31-42)

What you want: Characteristics of a desirable long-term partner

What you can get: Depends upon your own characteristics—your desirability to potential partners

Summarize the relative desirability of each potential partner as D_i = a weighted sum of the value of each characteristic

- where the weights depend on your preferences

Many characteristics will be generally valued in the market for partners—so there will be a lot of agreement about the D of each person.

The higher is your average D , assessed by your potential partners, the stronger is your market position, and the more desirable will be the partners you can attract.

The advantages of atypical preferences.

Assortative mating

Do likes match with likes, or do opposites attract?

Negative assortative mating: People who have different skills may complement one another

- increases the value of a joint household
- the production side of the economic family

Positive assortative mating: People with common interests and similar tastes will agree on what to buy and how to spend their time

- increases the value of household public goods
- the consumption side of the economic family

Also, marriage market competition leads to the matching of people with similar D's

Optimal Search Strategy

Potential partners: You have to find them, evaluate them, decide whether you want them, and find out whether they'll have you.

Analogous to job search—economists use a very similar model

Each period, you meet one potential partner, and can observe their D (iffy assumption, eh?)

(Note: The diagram is in Englund and Farkas, p. 38. My reservation D , $D^\#$, they call R . D^* would be at the right-hand tail of the distribution.)

Some will reject you

If you are not rejected, you need to decide between

- a. making an offer to this partner and stopping your search
- b. moving on and trying a new potential partner next period at a cost of C

Benefit of making an offer: this person's D

Cost of making an offer: passing up the opportunity to find someone better

Optimal search strategy: Set a reservation value of D (say $D^\#$) that equates expected costs and benefits, make offers to any potential partners with D 's equal to or above $D^\#$.

Regret? Only if you were misinformed about your opportunities and learn about the D distribution as you search.

What happens if you set a very high reservation D ?

- you can expect to get a better partner
- you can expect to be single for a long time

Note: Rational decision-makers will not wait for D^*

How can you find a great partner without waiting forever?

- increase your search intensity
- target your search
- reduce the costs of search
- be realistic/informed about the quality of your potential partner distribution