

## **AlterNet.org, February 23, 2005**

### *Love Machines*

By Jennifer Hahn, LA CityBeat. Posted February 23, 2005.

Relationship sites are a booming online business, as lonely hearts look to 'scientific software' to find mates. But are the biggest players hiding disturbing agendas? Story Tools

William Daniel is looking for love. At 60 years old, he's had his fair share of disappointment. A tall neurokinesiologist with a gentle smile and a handlebar mustache, he's no bum. And as he stands backstage at Dr. Phil's Valentine's Day show with a long-stemmed rose in hand, he's hopeful that this may be the day he finds his perfect match.

Daniel is one of about 250 members of the online relationship site PerfectMatch.com that have trekked out to Paramount Studios between January rainstorms to meet someone whose scientifically calculated relationship profile might click with their own. PerfectMatch unites its users based on its DUET™ Total Compatibility System, a modified version of a well-known personality test called the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator. PerfectMatch uses questionnaires to suggest a match between users whose test results indicate that their personalities and relationship needs work together.

Daniel has used online dating sites since 1997. "I've had a couple of really bad experiences," he says. "You find that most people do not see themselves the way other people see them. With PerfectMatch, everybody's being evaluated by the PerfectMatch standards."

Dr. Phil's producers initially keep the male and female PerfectMatch members in separate parts of the overly air-conditioned studio. The women, who sit in the audience, don't know that their scientifically selected suitors await them backstage. "These women are all part of PerfectMatch.com," Dr. Phil tells the audience, as the whole thing is taped for TV. "What they don't know is we have their perfect match here."

The bachelorettes clap and cheer with delight at the canned talk show stunt, their enthusiasm heartening the men, who file past the cameras sporting suits, leather jackets, and diversely landscaped facial hair.

Among the women is Ronique Nilson, 55, a retired civil engineer and fashion designer wearing a short, hot-pink dress and a silver heart-shaped pendant. In 1996, the early days of internet dating, Nilson began corresponding with a man she met online. After four months of "very honest and very profound" communication, they exchanged photos via fax. "Within six months we were in Mooréa celebrating our honeymoon," she says. When the marriage failed after a

few years, Nilson logged back on to the internet, hopeful that she might find a more compatible partner.

"I'm looking a lot into myself," Nilson says, explaining how the PerfectMatch assessment has helped her this time around. "I'm more skeptical, because I recognize that if there was a failure before, probably I am not perfect either."

In the last few years, the stigma that once cast internet personals as being only for the pathetic or dangerous has virtually disappeared, with tens of millions of Americans spending upward of \$400 million in 2004 to hook-up, date, long-term relate or marry. Sites like PerfectMatch.com and eHarmony.com have carved out a niche they call the "relationship" site, differentiating themselves from the more abundant dating sites by a commitment to lasting love. Women, who are less likely than men to join dating sites, make up more than half of the membership on these new sites.

Relationship sites sell themselves based on a "scientific" approach to matchmaking, using such personality factors as intensity and intellect. **True.com does this, too, but isn't above finding "a great date for the weekend." Even established dating sites, such as Yahoo! Personals, have begun to offer supposedly scientific matching.**

As in other sectors of cyberspace, however, skepticism is warranted. Matchmaking "science" is still far from a peer-reviewed science accepted in academia. But does that matter? Do these sites have an ethical obligation to guarantee that their tests are proven effective? After all, they're helping people make one of the most important connections of their lives: finding someone to share their bed on lazy Sunday mornings, to tend to their sick children, to grow old together. Are sites that offer scientific solutions to suffering singles merely "trading on our loneliness," as one frustrated user puts it? Or do they truly offer a computer-age breakthrough that guarantees, as Dr. Pepper Schwartz of PerfectMatch says, that we "don't ever have to be lonely again?"

Busy people like Daniel and Nilson aren't looking that deep into the machinery. They see each other at the show. But the computer has assigned them to someone else.

### Psychology with a Cross in its Heart

Not everyone finds comfort in the new sites. One 50-year-old man, who asked not to be identified, was drawn to eHarmony because he thought psychological testing "would just be a better way of vetting people." After filling out eHarmony's extensive questionnaire and discovering that the company did not offer same-sex matching, he thought "maybe they just haven't gotten around to it yet." But when

he encountered a blog devoted to eHarmony's exclusionary practices, he realized gays just weren't welcome there.

"There's not like a crucifix flash screen that suggests it, [but] somewhere in the background there, I kind of feel like they're encouraging Christian values," he says. "And for them, that means that they don't want to have [gay matching]."

Founded in 1998 by evangelical Christian Dr. Neil Clark Warren, eHarmony was the first and most popular of the test-based matchmaking sites and welcomes more than 10,000 new users a day to its pool of 6 million singles. The personality profile is free, but in order to contact other members, subscribers must pay \$49.95 for a one-month membership. So far, Warren's brainchild takes credit for 10,000 marriages, which he claims are happier and more stable than marriages not conceived on his site.

It's hard to know how faith might play into Warren's methods, since he is unwilling to subject his never-published test research to independent review. Is it just that Christian singles, bound by the expectations of their faith, are easier to match? These kinds of questions spin their way through the blogosphere. If eHarmony's research was influenced by evangelical Christian values, as some claim, is it really suited for lonely-hearted atheists, Jews, Muslims – or plain old backsliders?

While eHarmony denies a Christian bias in its approach to matchmaking, the company does have an explicit agenda. One of eHarmony's stated goals is to "reduce the divorce rate in America."

"While they don't mention it explicitly, there's obviously an evangelical influence," says Dr. Mark Thompson of weAttract.com, the company that created the relationship test recently launched on Yahoo! Personals. "Their ads are absolute marketing genius. There's a totally white background. There's a man with white hair standing with a white background. Who is he? It's not coming from him. Metaphorically, it's coming from God."

A sometime guest on the conservative Christian program The 700 Club and contributor to Focus On the Family magazine, Warren received a master's of divinity from Princeton Theological Seminary and a Ph.D. in clinical psychology from the University of Chicago. Warren has also written several books on mate selection. And in addition to operating a private practice, he served as professor and dean of the Fuller Theological Seminary's School of Psychology, which "places the cross in the heart of psychology."

Warren openly describes himself as a "passionate Christian" and an eHarmony advertisement on ChristianSinglesToday.com says the matchmaking company was founded on "Christian principles." But his wife, Marylyn Warren, the

company's senior vice president, is careful to say that "eHarmony is meant for everybody. We do not discriminate in any way."

This isn't exactly true, as eHarmony is the only site of the top-10 most trafficked not to offer same-sex matching. Marylyn Warren denies that eHarmony's exclusion of gays and lesbians has anything to do with its founder's religious principles. "It's nothing against it, we just don't want to be involved in something we don't know anything about," she says, noting that eHarmony's research was conducted on married heterosexual couples. "Our goal is to create good heterosexual families, I guess."

Jack Shepler, 21, a student at Ball State University in Indiana, posted the company's carefully crafted response to the FAQ "Does eHarmony do same sex matching?" on his blog (Jackola.net). He received a flurry of comments attacking the company's claim that its "research has only examined heterosexual relationships."

"I don't see that as anything more than rhetoric or an excuse for having that kind of discrimination," he says. "I don't feel that they should be turning anyone away."

Friendster.com, the online networking community, recently partnered with eHarmony, announcing, "Friendster proudly introduces eHarmony.com." But the company was unaware that its business partner excluded gays and lesbians until informed by CityBeat. Though not a dating site, per se, Friendster allows its members to search for "men, women, or men and women" of the same or opposite sex for dating. "To be honest," says Jim Scheinman, Friendster's head of business development, "I have to call and talk to eHarmony about that, because you're telling me this for the first time."

When asked if Friendster would ever exclude same-sex dating he quickly replies, "No, of course not."

PerfectMatch, True, and Yahoo! Personals all offer same-sex matching. And **yet Dr. James Houran, chief psychologist of True, says his own research shows that gay couples are not seeking exactly the same things out of a relationship as straight couples. "It just so happens that heterosexual and homosexual couples ... certainly agree on the recipe for compatibility, but they don't agree on the relative amounts of those ingredients."**

"We've always done separate studies for the gay and lesbian community," Thompson says, adding that he's "thrilled" with Yahoo!'s commitment to addressing the unique needs of their gay users.

Warren apparently has a different mission in mind. In a recent article for Focus on the Family on the so-called "cohabitation epidemic," Warren reveals a telling attitude about the relationship between religion and social science. "Many

couples who live together don't care about biblical principles, and even faith-oriented people often ignore what the Bible says. This is why psychological and other social science research becomes so critical." The implication seems to be that he'll use science to bring them back to the fold.

### Feeling Like a Reject?

In addition to turning away gays and lesbians, eHarmony also rejects one out of five people who fill out the 500-plus questions of its personality profile. If you're in this unlucky 20 percent, you receive a notice that reads, "Unable to match you at this time." According to The Wall Street Journal, eHarmony screens out anyone with a curiously low level of energy (perhaps indicative of depression), users with three or more unsuccessful marriages, or anyone who fails to answer its questions truthfully.

Section three of eHarmony's test is: "About Your Feelings." It asks applicants to rate how often during the last month they have felt anxious, out of control, depressed, unable to cope, etc. Meanwhile, **Houran of True calls screening for emotional instability unethical. "Our test and our service does not discriminate against anybody with a mental disability," he says. "We do not get into diagnosing. I know of no psychiatrist that would endorse any online method of diagnosing anybody."**

Despite loads of online speculation, however, there is no evidence that eHarmony rejects any other demographic than gays. Not even atheists. Nor is there evidence to suggest that the site refuses to match outside of race and religion.

### Opposites Attract?

Samuel Tai, 37, a computer security professional from Long Beach, turned to the Internet to find love, only to be rejected by eHarmony's screening process. "My whole family is trying to marry me off," he says. "One, I'm Chinese and also I'm the firstborn son.

"The entire premise behind the personality matching is scientifically flawed," says Tai, now working on his master's in computer science. "The assumption is basically that like is compatible with like, which may or may not be true."

The major difference between the philosophies employed by PerfectMatch, True, and eHarmony represent a conflict known in the relationship field as homogamy versus complementarity. The homogamous approach is based on the idea that like fits better with like. For the most part, eHarmony's matching philosophy seems homogamous. "What our research kept saying is if you find somebody whose intelligence is a lot like yours, whose ambition is a lot like yours, whose energy is a lot like yours, whose spirituality is a lot like yours, whose curiosity is a

lot like yours – it was a similarity model," Warren has said on the PBS series Small Business School. "These are the two principles we believe in: emotional health and finding somebody who's a lot like you."

True, PerfectMatch, and Yahoo! prefer to match users based on complementarity. "We all know, not just in our heart of hearts, but in our experience, that sometimes we're attracted, indeed get along better with somebody different from us," says Dr. Schwartz, a noted expert and professor of sociology at the University of Washington. "So the nice thing about the Myers-Briggs was it's not just characteristics, but how they fit together."

Snake Oil for the Lonely

**Houran is adamant that his test is the only truly scientific one on the net. True's test measures 99 relationship factors to calculate an overall compatibility index score between two members, telling them the likelihood that they will get along. Angered by what he sees as his competitors' lack of scientific discipline, he's gone so far as to author an article in The North American Journal of Psychology detailing their failings.**

**"If we're going to have credibility as an industry, we need to actually use science," Houran says, noting that True's test passed an independent audit by a lead statistician with the Illinois State Board of Education. "We're taking millions of dollars matching people; we should at least ... [make] sure that our tests actually work."**

Thompson agrees, saying, "We're appealing to people who aren't succeeding, who feel a certain level of urgency because of their biological clock or because they've been rejected or hurt. So there's an added level of responsibility that goes to that."

**Houran reserves his greatest criticism for eHarmony, which in December received \$110 million in venture funding. eHarmony assesses its users through a patented questionnaire which measures 29 dimensions of compatibility, such as romantic passion, communication style, and spirituality. Warren claims that his "scientifically proven" test was based on over 30 years of his clinical experience, as well as a nationwide study of over 5,000 married couples. "I've seen no evidence they even conducted any study that forms the basis of their test," Dr. Houran says. "If you're touting that you're doing something scientific ... you inform the academic community."**

While initially willing to discuss its site with CityBeat, eHarmony stopped returning phone calls when questioned about its research.

Houran also criticizes PerfectMatch and weAttract for not having their research peer-reviewed. "I had it vetted by a lot of my peers," says Schwartz of PerfectMatch, whose site boasts endorsements from many notable academics in the fields of psychology and sociology.

Thompson suggests it's impractical to subject applied science created under the duress of market influences to academic peer-review procedures. "The peer-review system is not going to apply here," Thompson says, adding that the turnaround for publishing in peer-reviewed journals is typically six months. "We had two months to develop the system for Yahoo! We literally worked around the clock. We did studies on 50,000 people. [Review] is going to have to be via a different system." He does add that his research was conducted using the American Psychological Association's guidelines for ethical research, and that it was reviewed by a panel of independent academics.

eHarmony did release a study at the 16th Annual Convention of the American Psychological Society in May of last year, allegedly proving that "eHarmony married couples are significantly happier than couples married for a similar length of time who met by other means."

The True site is unique in that it puts subscribers through mandatory background checks, screening out felons and married people. This brings up real ethical issues for Thompson: "Should we be telling people we can keep them safe, which is what [True] tell[s] them? Should we be telling people that we can get them married, which is what eHarmony is saying? Are we hurting people? Does what we offer work?"

For instance, he's willing to accept that eHarmony is responsible for 10,000 marriages. But that's a significantly small proportion of the millions of matches they claim to have suggested. Thompson says you have a better chance of finding your future spouse if you "go hang out at the Safeway."

### Digitalized Daters

The PerfectMatch members who meet on Dr. Phil are disappointed that they haven't all been united with their potential soul mate, but seem to understand that very few things in life ever work out perfectly. At a post-show reception at Hollywood and Highland, the singles flirt, laugh, and commiserate about the dating life over a Wolfgang Puck catered lunch. About 15 of the couples from the show seem to have hit it off. As do audience members William Daniel and Ronique Nilson, who just bump into each other.

"I can't understand why PerfectMatch hasn't sent me her profile," Daniel says, beaming as he peers at her over his handlebar mustache.

"This gentleman is a dancer," she says, enchanted. "I love to dance! I am a ballroom dancer and he is too." While the two weren't brought together by their compatible profiles, they're still eager to see what DUET would think of their pairing. "I'm going to look hers up right away, this intense dancer," Daniel says. "We may not need PerfectMatch much longer." A few hours later, the couple enters a Starbucks together, chatting and laughing away. Sometimes old-fashioned flirting and pheromones can still get the job done, at least for an afternoon.

Jennifer Hahn, a freelance writer in Los Angeles, was formerly an editorial fellow at Mother Jones.