

Pricing, prizing and praising in the dating services sector – a conceptual approach

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Introduction

Is (s)he worth it? For researchers interested in matters of value, esteem and exchange (Helgesson & Kjellberg, 2013), the world of dating services (both mass-market online dating and bespoke personal agents) provides a rich empirical context to understand how individuals might answer this question. Why are some attributes, in Dewey's words, priced, prized and praised (McFall & Ossandon, 2014); how are partners and relationships seen, and what is unseen; what justifications and 'orders of worth' (Boltanski & Thevenot, 2006) might be used; what kind of work must go on, among service providers and among users, to devise exchanges and to settle matters of value, when it comes to affairs of the heart? The little question with which we begin this paper should be of particular interest to those who examine the formation of markets and accompanying evaluative practices; to the 'new, new economic sociology' (McFall & Ossandon, 2014) and the project of 'valuography' (Dussauge et al., 2015), which recognises valuing as a practical, socially and materially embedded process. This analytic 'turn to value' (Stark, 2011) has opened up space for sociological investigation of the politics (Trompette, 2013) and pragmatics (Beuscart & Mellet, 2013) of evaluation, and recognises that the assignment of 'worth' involves moral and aesthetic, as well as economic, judgements.

This paper, a conceptual overview of dating services from three very different perspectives, contributes to the growing literature of valuation (Helgesson & Kjellberg, 2013). As with all such work, it takes issue with the assumption that values are pre-existent in the world and

exogenous to social processes. The valuographic approach seeks to demonstrate through empirical study how values are achieved in practical interactions, and showing that they are often embedded in material as well as social infrastructures. In this paper we offer a conceptual approach for analysing the work of devising and valuation in dating services; the valuing of potential partners or relationships is neither given, nor driven by social norms somehow constructed elsewhere, but the result of a complex process of social and material configuration. We examine how moral economies of love are worked out in dating sites, and explore the interplay of valuation and the epistemic: an important part of valuing is deciding what should be known (Dussauge et al., 2015). In the case of dating services, knowledge of potential partners and relationships is bound up in the infrastructures of the service, and the settling of certain attributes as valuable and others is less so is an important part of the commercial offering of any service.

By dating services, we mean both online dating sites, now a huge and profitable industry turning over in excess of (\$2 billion) annually, and smaller, but exclusive there spoke dating services, where agents charge as much as £15,000 to find a partner for their subscribers. These off-line services have grown in part as a result of the proliferation of online sites and a feeling of disappointment or alienation among certain affluent, often older users. Online dating, and the associated off-line services, are sometimes regarded as a frivolity by sociological and organisational researchers. One of our intentions in this paper and in previous work has been to show that they are a significant organisational phenomenon, the sheer scale of which offers potentially important consequences. Dating services have even been described as an unlicensed and unregulated form of social engineering (Houran et al., 2004). Online dating has certainly been taken seriously by researchers in the psychological sciences (Finkel et al., 2012); we suggest that it is time for organisation theorists and sociologist with an interest in problems of valuation to do the same.

Our own conceptual valuographic expedition presents three theoretical frameworks, each of which can offer a different account of how things – partners, relationships, or even love – become valorised and valued. We suggest a correspondence with the orders of worth suggested by Boltanski and Thevenot (2006). The first of these is the market order. Boltanski and Thevenot (2006:193f) suggest that market valuations are driven by competition for rare goods. Nothing can be rarer, of course, than the attentions of the one and only, and throughout the 20th century, markets offered a productive metaphor for sociologists studying

relationship formation. Notions of market exchange could grasp the competitive rivalry of college students (Waller, 1937) or offer a theoretical framework to conceptualise highly gendered accounts of female struggles for attractive and wealthy mates. Bourdieu (2008) analysed peasant marriage markets, and Becker (1973) found the assumption of a competitive market among mates to be a compelling basis for economic modelling. More recently the authors of the present paper have argued that the market metaphor is performatively embedded in the architectures and agencements of online dating (Roscoe & Chillias, 2014). Our account suggests that the settling of characteristics in potential partners as worthy is performed by the architectures of dating sites; our argument implies that devising work is carried out by operators and service providers, and that evaluation is distributed across the agencements (Callon et al., 2007) of dating websites and services.

However, there are limitations to the marriage-as-markets perspective's explanatory power, revealed by what it cannot see: there is no account for the persistence of homogamy across race and class, for example. Characteristics of worth are presented in generally reductive manner; for the marriage-as-market account we do not really need to understand the basis or formation of individual preferences, but simply that they exist. We therefore present two further perspectives on dating services. The first is a 'domestic world', with dating services understood in terms of capital and habitus (P. Bourdieu, 1977). For Boltanski and Thevenot (2006:165f) the domestic world is distinguished by adherence to tradition, upbringing, hierarchy and status. While market perspectives explain homogamy and assortative matching in terms of search frictions and related practicalities such as distance (Smith, 2006), a Bourdieusian approach sees homogamy as the result of a complex interplay of social structures, particularly the maintenance of advantage and distinction.

Finally we propose an analytic lens based on Boltanski and Thevenot's (2006:203f) industrial world. In contrast with the market world, the ordering principle is efficiency, and worth is defined by functionality and reliability. We suggest that the practical activities of those using dating services embody the principles of the industrial world. In other words, the business of finding a partner is performatively enacted as work, with all its associated values and practices. Once again, a repositioning of this kind radically reshapes the kind of knowledge that is necessary for the formation of a satisfactory relationship. In summary, these conceptual framings allow us to pay attention to the valuing and devising done by

participants, who incorporate overlapping, and sometimes conflicting, orders of worth into their assessment of partners and relationships.

Through these orders of worth we show that dating services stand as a locus of competing, overlapping, and intertwined evaluative practices, and as such should be of great interest to sociological investigations of value and exchange in organisation studies. We suggest that the construction of value is an important part of what dating services do, and that future research, as well as practitioners who take an interest in dating services must recognize such processes of valorization as endogenous to the mechanisms and practices of the field.

Our paper presents a conceptual framework based on a reading of the primary literature. We begin by sketching out the growing literature of valuation. We then present are three analytic lenses in more detail, before concluding; our paper suggests that settling the question ‘is (s)he worth it’ is a complicated and tricky affair.

Valuing love

Those who search for a partner online, or to delegate the task to an expensive, bespoke agency, are faced with a difficult valuation problem. Compared with the process of dating ‘in the wild’, where social cues, embodied sensations, and genetic predisposition – not to mention the pressing restriction of physical presence and the scarcity this entails – all play a part in evaluating potential partners. When online, individuals are offered a relatively unlimited choice, and must first of all establish how choices must be made; they must decide not only what characteristics to value, but how to value them, sometimes in the less than fully-realized knowledge that modes of valuation are performative (Austin, 1978) of worth.

Following the flourishing ‘valuographic’ literature (Dussauge et al., 2015) we treat valuation of potential partners as a process and a practice dependent upon not only individuals, but also materialities and multiple ontologies. We recognise that the settling of a characteristic as valuable is as important as, and often contiguous with, valuation itself. In each instance, elements of moral evaluation are present in the decision to consider some characteristics as more valuable than others. The recognition that values do not arrive in the world pre-formed, and that the process of constructing values is not in and of itself value free underlies much European sociology of worth; EP Thompson (1971), understood economies as distinctively ‘moral economies’, and begin from the position that moral, or cultural, evaluation is at work

in the construction and settling of value. Valuation proliferates through multiple productions of the social, which we might say, with Law and Urry (2004), are equally valid, equally respectable, but different. Evaluation based on subjective worth, rather than (supposedly) objective calculation, implies the possibility of overlapping, competing, or even conflicting orders of value. Stark (2011) calls these conflicts and contests a ‘dissonance’. For Stark, dissonance between competing values becomes a source of possibility for profit: arbitrage or innovation driven by negotiations over what ‘goods’ or characteristics should be considered valuable in the first instance. As tradable goods multiply, as it becomes apparent that the ontological construction of those goods is inseparable from normative considerations of ‘the good’, we begin to recognise that what counts – what is worth knowing – is up for grabs, and that matters of concern, with their attendant power relations (Foucault, 1980), may be articulated through the production of knowledge itself.

This ‘turn to value’ (Muniesa, 2011; Stark, 2011) attempts to heal the rift in the social sciences left by the Parsonian division of labour between sociology and economics, where economics took value and sociology claimed values. Stark prefers the term worth, with its layering of esteem and evaluation, to the academically fraught terms of value and values; he characterises pragmatist, European sociologies of worth as recognizing the multifaceted context of esteem as ‘the very fabric of calculation, of rationality, of value’ (Stark, 2011:11). In this paper we rely heavily upon one such European sociology of worth: the ‘metaphysics’ of justification, proposed by Boltanski and Thevenot (2006), who sketch out the overlapping, complementary and competing orders of worth by which people may settle a good as valuable. They offer six different regimes of valuation: the inspired world, familiar to artists and visionaries; the domestic world; the world of fame, organised around public opinion; the civic world, emphasising collectives, the law, rights and participation; the market world; and the industrial world. Worlds of valuation are organised on particular principles and have specific subjects, objects, and relations of worth. They are policed by particular tests and judgements. Throughout this paper we make use of three of these worlds, and we now elaborate on each.

In the domestic world, worth ‘is a function of the position one occupies in chains of personal dependence [and] can only be grasped in a relational sense: a worthier than..., less worthy than...’ (Boltanski & Thevenot, 2006: 164). Worth in the domestic world is inherently hierarchical and bound by tradition. Proper behaviour is dependent upon status, but

emphasises distinction, discretion trust benevolence and honesty. Virtuous behaviour is the result of upbringing and habit, and tied to appropriate rules of etiquette and other such social mores. Family ceremonies and other social events, as well as everyday conversation, are the tests that confirm status within the domestic world, while the crucial role of judgement is knowing on whom to bestow trust or appreciation. On the other hand, failures of judgement may involve rudeness, gossip and indiscreet or vulgar behaviour. There is a clear Bourdieusian element to the domestic world, as social status and class are preserved by the deployment of certain social capitals (P Bourdieu, 1984).

Economic relations, on the other hand, are based upon two rival forms of coordination: the market order and the industrial order. The former (Boltanski & Thevenot, 2006: 193f) centres upon competition for ownership of (rare) goods. An object or action will be considered worthy if it is desirable, saleable, or successful. Failure and rejection are the key features of unworthiness. The market becomes the coordinating mechanism by which individuals can find their place in relationship with others as ‘businessmen’ – which is to say, by way of a particular kind of interaction order – although such attention to others is likely to be opportunistic in nature. Price and monetary value are the arbiters of judgement, and the settling of a transaction is the requisite test. The market, therefore, allows the maintenance of disinterested social relations through the construction of another set of differently interested social relations (Boltanski & Thevenot, 2006: 203). The industrial world, on the one hand, centres upon efficiency, performance and productivity. It is the realm of scientific method and predictable functionality. Unsurprisingly, worth is indicated by function, reliability and operation; people are worthy when they are able to ‘integrate themselves into the machinery, the cogwheels of an organisation’ (Boltanski & Thevenot, 2006: 205). Worth involves fitting into routines and practices; unworthiness, on the other hand, is a state of unproductivity, idleness, and an inability to fit in. We will find these ideas a powerful means of analysing dating services. In the place of social hierarchies (in the domestic order) we find professionals, experts and specialists, who deploy tools and methods. Tests centre upon setting to work, or launching, while judgement will centre upon efficacy.

The orders of worth sketched out in the previous paragraphs provide a powerful heuristic framework for analysing dating services. In each case, the lens of analysis will allow us to identify different aspects of the complex, shifting and overlapping processes of valuation and work in the field. We will show that, at least in the case of dating services, the question of

worth with which the paper began is multifaceted and complex. First of all, we must analyse dating services through the lens of each separate order of worth.

The ‘market world’ of matching

Throughout the 20th century, social scientists seeking to analyse relationship formation found that models based around the market, and market-based evaluations, offered a productive theoretical framework for investigation. While accounts of relationship formation as market-based tend to ascribe values as exogenous to the process of matching, it is quite possible to describe market-based relationship formation as organized around competition and valorizing success and desirability. Scholars writing in this vein have understood relationships in terms of individual agents seeking partnerships that maximise on these existing markers of quality, often thinly conceptualized as beauty or wealth. Davis (1966, cited in Levi Martin and George, 2006) offered a highly gendered ‘theory of generalised prostitution’ based on a stratification of sexual attractiveness where the wealthiest men bid for the most attractive women, and women’s attractiveness is tradable for wealth and social advantage. Talcott Parsons (1968) saw monogamous relationships as a social-contract type solution to a potentially divisive scarcity of mates. He too considered individual attractiveness and preferences as exogenous to the matching process, seeing them as embedded in cultural norms.

The most influential, and notorious, contribution to thinking about relationship formation as a market comes from Becker (1973, 1974), who models marriage as ‘revenue-maximizing’ in terms of the combined gains on partners’ individual attributes. For Becker, marriage is not only externally competitive (between individuals for potential partners) but also internally competitive (between partners for a share of the rents available from marriage). Becker's work has given rise to a comprehensive literature of the economics of marriage, impossible to summarise here but taking in such variations as divorce (Goldmanis et al., 2011), search frictions (Smith, 2006), and marriage earnings as the basis for a model of the costs of prostitution (Edlund & Korn, 2002).

Most recently Illouz (2012) has subpoenaed the notion of competitive relationship formation into a feminist critique of relationship formation as a market where men are systematically

able to exploit women's limited reproductive period. Illouz's central claim is that, in an era of choice, 'generalised sexual competition transforms the very structure of the will and desire, and that desire takes on the properties of economic exchange: that is, that it becomes regulated by the laws of supply and demand, scarcity, and oversupply' (Illouz, 2012:58). Her argument is that men have certain structural advantages as matching takes place, primarily due to the social construction of femininity and its tie to reproduction. Her reasoning counters Davis' assertion that marriage allows attractive women to lock in their gains while they remain beautiful. Illouz argues that the prospect of 'decay' – constructed by narratives positioning women's bodies as reproductive vessels with a limited time frame, and exacerbated by contemporary discourses of beauty – forces women to settle for less valuable partners: low quality men who are still able to remain in the market.

But how are partners evaluated in each case? Like Parsons and Davis, Illouz sees attractiveness as embedded in social norms. Her critical perspective, however, locates the root of sexual attractiveness in consumer culture, and particularly the beauty industry. Faced by the abundance of choice and the variety of taste, evaluating potential partners becomes a solipsistic endeavour and a burden:

'individuals are required to engage in an ongoing effort of introspection to establish their preferences, to evaluate their options, and to ascertain their sentiments. This demands a rational form of self-inspection which is accompanied by an essentialist (authentic) regime of emotional decision-making in which the decision to pair with someone has to be made on the basis of emotional self-knowledge and the capacity to project emotions into the future. According to this view, finding the best possible mates consists of choosing the person who corresponds to the essentialized self, the set of preferences and needs that define the self.' (Illouz, 2012:91)

A 'valuographic' perspective, on the other hand, sets out with Dewey's observation that valuation is a reflexive process based upon activities of valuation and inseparable from the valuer (Dussauge et al., 2015:7; Muniesa, 2011). Ironically, a more Deweyan perspective on attractiveness comes from one of the earliest contributions to this genre of love-as-market thinking. Waller (1937) investigated the relationship formation practices of college students. In what he called 'the rating and dating game', college students ranked members of the opposite sex in terms of attractiveness and competed for dates with the most highly rated. Waller presented an unusual insight, neglected by later studies, that the rating and dating

game was performative: on college campuses attractiveness of women was, at least in part, determined by an individual's place in the rankings. Men, on the other hand, were assessed by more stable categories: they needed to have spending money, good clothes, and access to a car.

With the exception of Waller, these approaches share certain assumptions: a methodological individualism; that attractiveness is exogenous to the mating game; and that some kind of hierarchical ordering of quality is possible. Both notions become problematic when moving from conceptual theory to empirical investigation (Levi Martin & George, 2006), not least because a sociological perspective demands some attention to the mechanisms through which processes of exchange and valuation can take place, and into the valorisation of particular attributes. For this reason, market-based theories of marriage have tended to operate best and the very broad level of wealth and beauty (Weiss, 1997), or to take refuge in the social construction of desirability. As Levi Martin and George note (2006:119)

‘The use of market logic where there is no market leads to a total inability to identify the social organization of sexual desiring—instead, analysts are forced to embrace an orthodox economic model where this desiring must be fundamentally idiosyncratic, asocial, and inexplicable.’

Dating services, however, actively operationalise ‘the social organization of sexual desiring’. Our previous research into the mechanisms of online dating has suggested that these sites do indeed work like markets (Roscoe & Chillias, 2014). We make use of a market-devices perspective (Muniesa et al., 2007) to explore the notion of a ‘cyborg dater’ – an *agencement* of human, devices and theory, through which instrumental, utility-maximising behaviour is performed. The algorithms and interfaces of online dating sites make quality visible, and shape desirability, for example by systematising search characteristics and offering more prominence to those profiles identified as popular. Like Waller’s college rankings, dating engines offer a mechanism for valorising certain qualities, equivalent to the collective agreement on quality that takes place through the price mechanism. Levi Martin and George (2006) complain that the market, when applied to relationship formation, is simply a metaphor, lacking specific explanatory mechanisms. In the case of online dating, mechanisms are evident even to participants, who will seek to manipulate the sites’ qualifying devices. The popular story of the data analyst who reverse engineers a ‘hot’, i.e. generically attractive, profile in order to win a partner exemplifies this problem (Webb, 2013). Evidence from the

psychological sciences shows that website users are instrumental in their behaviour (Whitty & Carr, 2006), while economic analysis has shown that the websites themselves produce algorithmically stable outcomes (Hitsch et al., 2010). The process of comparison and evaluation of multiple profiles, has the effect of lowering commitment and ‘fosters judgemental, assessment-based evaluations’ (Finkel et al., 2012:47). In other words, both the behaviour of individuals online and outcomes of the site in aggregate suggest that websites enact market-world modes of valuation.

We suggest that the cyborg dater, thus constructed, lays claim to notions of worth associated with the market polity (Boltanski & Thevenot, 2006): competition as an arbitral principle, instrumental self-maximisation, and the pursuit of scarce goods. The architectures of online sites – interfaces, search mechanisms, and the algorithms that operationalize user choices and rankings – are crucial in the valorization of some attributes over others. Interfaces that focus on partner attributes such as age, height, type of figure, hair length and hair colour as opposed to, say, personal qualities and educational achievements implement particular categories of understanding and accounting for the body and for personality, creating a ‘standard body’ (Jeacle, 2003) and perhaps a ‘standard personality’ (Roscoe & Chillias, 2014). Amy Webb’s (2013) advice to aspiring online daters that they should straighten their hair, iron out personality quirks and use fun and aspirational language, gives a clear indication of the generic quality of attractiveness prized online.

Nonetheless, there remain difficulties in an uncritical acceptance of these market-style evaluations as the sole basis of relationship formation online. Accounts of valuation must ask, not only what is seen but also what is unseen, and while the explicit profiling mechanisms of dating services – both on and off-line – makes much explicit, other aspects of valorization remain into an invisible. A focus on the micro-level operations of ranking and sorting within sites, with its matching of physical attributes, geographic location and interests – all of which is germane to the construction of a revenue maximising partnership, understood in terms of future rents from shared activities, easy co-location, and immediate physical appeal – may distract from the broader, macro level concerns of education, race and class familiar to classical sociology. Despite the emphasis on cultural and ethnic homogamy in the sociological literature of marriage (Kalmijn, 1998), such distinctions are not articulated in the mechanisms of the sites themselves, and our micro-level focus struggles to offer an account of the persistence of such phenomena online (Fiore & Donath, 2005; Hitsch et al., 2010). In

the next section of this paper we incorporate social structures into our examination of dating service providers, in terms of the broking and preservation of capital, and point to the circulation of strikingly different frameworks of valuation and valorisation among relationship seekers and service providers alike.

Love in the ‘domestic world’

Pierre Bourdieu’s sociological framework offers us an alternative theoretical lens. It is capable of understanding matching as embedded in practices of exchange, but conducted according to invisible social rules and conventions. Agents navigate these symbolic exchanges through an acquired ‘habitus’ – a feel for the game, or *sens pratique* which, when it is ‘in phase with the world, is often so marvellously adjusted that it can make one believe in rational calculation’ (Pierre Bourdieu, 2008: 184). In the market-order of economic exchange, price – however operationalized – acts as a concrete measure of worth. In symbolic exchanges, on the other hand, there is ‘a taboo of making things explicit’ (P Bourdieu, 1998:96): although everyone may recognize the exchange of beauty and money, shared beliefs or class positions, the partners will still declare undying love for each other. Bourdieu himself identified the antinomy between the market order and the domestic order; love is the organising principle of the domestic economy and is, according to Bourdieu, ‘threatened in its specific logic by the market economy’ where calculation and credit are dominant (P Bourdieu, 1990:106).

The fundamental unit of Bourdieusian analysis is the conceptual triad of field, capital and habitus (Emirbayer & Johnson, 2008). Fields are social microcosms structured by their own histories and exhibiting internal logics that produce ‘taken for granted’ assumptions, in this case about the processes and practices of relationship formation (Townley, 2015).

Analytically, the field of intimate relationships can be defined by the ‘three fundamental dimensions’ of capital: the amount of usable resources in the form of economic, cultural and social capital, their relative weight within the field and how configurations may change over time (Townley, 2015). In the field of intimate relationships, we may conceive of relationship capital as the tradable commodity, and its composition an empirical question temporally bounded in particular social spaces.

The field mediates between structural economic and social conditions such as social norms regarding marriage and who may marry or co-habit and the practices of those who participate in the field. Along with field and capital, habitus provides a conceptual tool to reconcile social structures and individual agency; it is described as the relationship between ‘the capacity to produce classifiable practices and works, and the capacity to differentiate and appreciate these practices and products (taste)’ (P Bourdieu, 1984:166). Habitus is the mechanism by which types and levels of capitals are defined, distributed interpreted and practiced in social world(s). Lifestyles are the systematic products of habitus, as descriptive elements but also as ‘the set of durable and transposable dispositions that sculpt and steer thoughts, feelings and conduct’ (Wacquant, 2014:6). Once acquired habitus enables the generation of practices that adapt to the conditions it meets: hence we encounter similar dispositions and tastes in social classes that effect class reproduction. Initial socialisation and education are central to developing habitus, yet it is also possible to acquire the habitus of other fields as individuals move through the social world.

According to Boltansky and Thevenot (2006), notions of worth in the domestic world are bound by hierarchy and tradition. Virtuous behaviour is the result of upbringing and habit, and tied to appropriate rules of etiquette and other such social mores. By this account, it is clear how certain attributes become settled as valuable; participants in the field, through their socialised backgrounds, come to understand different versions of compatibility and identify who is attractive, who will make a ‘good partner’, marriageability and also whose opinion of the match counts. Traditionally, the family unit has been the basis of symbolic marriage exchanges, mobilised through social networks involving economic exchanges (in the form of dowries) and symbolic exchanges of prestige, thus maintaining the family name. Again, for Boltanski and Thevenot, family ceremonies and other social events, as well as everyday conversation, are the tests that confirm status within the domestic world.

Bourdieu, in his early research, conducted a study of the marriage market and marriage strategies among peasants in rural France (Pierre Bourdieu, 2008). His quest was to understand why, in close-knit communities, many (attractive) young men remained bachelors and were described as ‘unmarriageable’. The internal logic of the matching system at that time meant that marriage was governed by very strict rules that ensured the future of the family farm and affirmation of the social hierarchy via a dowry system that favoured marriage between eldest son and younger daughter or between younger son and eldest

daughter. Homologous matching preserved the hierarchy of land ownership and social standing, and also minimised the risk of either party having to repay the dowry on a spouse's death. The system of marriage relied on the intervention of family, priest, pedlar to disseminate information on marriageable young men and women, their dowry and prospects with the help of the local matchmaker to effect introductions (Pierre Bourdieu, 2008:35). In this system, bachelors were mainly younger sons in large or poor families and bachelorhood a natural sacrifice of individual to collective interest.

However, the interwar years saw this system disrupted. The exchange of dowries could not be maintained, young men and women left to seek employment in towns and cities and conservation of land ownership became less important than social status and the corresponding lifestyle (2008:44). As this closed society opened up, the strict rules on marriage altered and the search for partners gave way to a logic of individual competition. Unmarriageable bachelors – now the eldest sons tied to the land – were ‘victims of the replacement of a closed market with an open market where everyone must manage on his own and can count only on his own assets, on his own symbolic capital’ (Pierre Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992:165).

As Bourdieu's study shows, being born in a particular social world means a doxic acceptance of that world. Illouz (2012) makes this understanding the basis for a sharp critique of contemporary matching. She argues that ‘sexual fields’ have emerged as ‘social arenas in which sexuality becomes an autonomous dimension of pairing, an area of social life that is intensely commodified, and an autonomous criterion of evaluation’ (Illouz, 2012:242). Where marriage fields may incorporate sexuality, but also take stock of the socio-economic and cultural distinctions noted above, sexual fields allow for traffic across these socio-economic and cultural stratifications. Social status depends upon economic achievement, which can be exchanged for sexual status, and norms of sexual attractiveness privilege youth. For Illouz, therefore, sexual fields are once again dominated by men, especially upper middle-class men, who are emotionally detached and scared of commitment within these fields.

The notion of ‘relationship capital’ can therefore be unbundled in numerous ways. We recognize from Bourdieu that agents negotiate symbolic exchanges of this capital according to locally and culturally specific practices of valuation; from Boltanski and Thevenot that

codes of domestic worth provide a durable order of worth; and from Illouz that the sexualisation of matching exchanges allows powerful, high-status male actors to deploy their capital more freely across otherwise impermeable stratifications. Bourdieu suggests that within the field of intimate relations ‘[t]aste is a matchmaker’ (P Bourdieu, 1984:239); it is the decoding of habitus that orients social encounters, signals good character, and produces affinity or signals compatibility to would-be lovers.

We asked what kind of work must be done by dating services in terms of devising exchanges between participants. Recognizing the role of taste in affecting matches explains why dating services orient themselves to socially significant pastimes or class markers. Online, taste becomes objectified in pictures and user descriptions – ‘likes and dislikes’ are ubiquitous in user profiles and act as signals for participants to decode. Dress, tastes and pastimes are symbols of who we are, that in turn generate class distinctions (P Bourdieu, 1984). Social distinctions, we suggest, form the basis of compatibility matching processes operationalized online. Behind the mask of free choice, dating agents set themselves up as ‘relationship experts’ and ‘tap into’ these deeply held dispositions by recognising that shared tastes are a basis for matching. Through this analytic lens the fragmentation of dating services into market niches appears driven by a desire for assortative matching. Online dating offers segmentation reflecting upbringing, status and cultural resources: there are dating sites for Oxbridge graduates and dating sites for spouses in uniform (i.e. soldiers, police, nurses etc.). Each appears to cater to distinct demographics, as does the successful Guardian dating site, a magnet for educated, left-leaning metropolitan singles.

In summary, love, as operationalized by dating services, becomes a justification for class reproduction and distinction and preservation of the status quo. It valorizes partners according to the conservative and hierarchical domestic order of worth, effecting symbolic exchanges that are bounded in ways quite distinct from the supposedly free choice circulating within marriage-as-market analyses. We suggest that the Bourdieusian analysis can go some way to explain the persistence of assortative matching and homogamy in the absence of search frictions, and that it offers a useful complementary analysis to the notions of relationship formation as a purely economic exchange.

There is, however, a final aspect of dating services to consider. While the previous sections have considered the valuation of potential partners and the valorization of certain

characteristics within the context of differing notions of exchange, we must also consider the rupture in the practices of relationship search that has been caused by the growth of dating services, and the attendant consequences for notions of worth in relationship formation.

An ‘industrial world’ of relationships

Our third analytic lens makes use of the interplay between public and private lives to analyse dating services. This lens’ emphasis on efficiency, reliability and expertise invokes Boltanski and Thevenot’s (2006:204-206) industrial world: the realm of scientific method and predictable functionality, where worth is indicated by function, reliability and operation. We suggest that work practices are increasingly, and perhaps insidiously, incorporated into private lives by dating services. They provide an efficient and expedient way to form relationships and screen potential partners before meeting, to lower risk and increase the productivity of scarce dating time. For those seeking romance through dating services, important skills are those of the Weberian bureaucrat, ‘precision, speed, unambiguity, knowledge of the files, continuity, discretion’ (Weber, 1978:973).

The spread of work practices to private lives exemplifies a general collapse of the distinction between work and leisure in contemporary society, and indeed, interactions between work and leisure in contemporary society have received much scholarly attention. For example, scholars have raised concerns over the detrimental effects of work on life: it is said that demands placed on workers of all types impinge on family responsibilities and even that work is bad for health (Warhurst et al., 2008). On the other hand, organisational cultures in contemporary workplaces cast work as a form of play, resulting in claims that work is now “better than sex” (Trinca & Fox, 2004). Such claims directly valorize the practices of the industrial world over those of the domestic world, and work, not private lives, can be now seen as the primary source of fulfilment. In contrast to Daniel Bell’s utopian vision of a post-industrial society where a shift from manual to mental labour frees up time for leisure activities (Bell, 1973), the evidence suggests that at all levels of the hierarchy people work harder, if not longer, and private time activities too have to be “worked at” (Hochschild, 1997).

The industrial world valorizes efficiency, performance and productivity, and, as the time allotted to work expands, ‘the principles of efficiency are regularly applied to family life’ (Hochschild, 1997:49). In leisure activities, paucity of time focuses user’s attentions on

efficiency and risk avoidance, while the investment of financial resources seeks to increase the productivity of the little time available; as with other forms of leisure, or domestic labour, the expansion of work drives the use of dating services. The time-consuming messiness of “meeting in the wild” is circumvented by the use of dating services: online services offer partners with similar likes and habits, functionally appropriate mates who are able – paraphrasing Boltanski and Thevenot (2006: 205) – to integrate themselves into the machinery, the cogwheels of a relationship. They offer matches who are ‘right for you, right now’, valorizing functional worth over attractiveness and ‘spark’; bespoke agents also stress the importance of commonalities and promise a better level of service by screening out unsuitable and dishonest suitors. In the industrial world, experts and professionals are the highest status individuals, valued for their ability to deploy tools and methods: considerable, although questionable, expertise is embedded in the mechanisms and tools of dating services, both on and offline. Expertise can be validated by education and recognised qualifications in, for example, psychological couples counselling. In the US qualifications in couples matching have begun to appear¹ and these serve to bolster matchmaking as a profession with rules and ways of enactment.

Yet work practices offer more than just efficiency. Hochschild (1997) suggested that work life may be preferable to home life. Her interviewees admit that they choose, and indeed prefer, to spend more time at work than at home with families. Whilst work may be demanding, it is ordered and easier to manage than life at home. Particularly for working women, who bear the brunt of household chores, staying on at work becomes an attractive escape from family life and the “second shift” of domestic work. Our analytical lens suggests that dating services do not just offer efficiency and risk mitigation, but are valued for their orderly, predictable and manageable nature. Finding romance becomes, in effect, another project, the practices of which are familiar from working lives.

So, if online dating is best understood in terms of work practices, what sort of work is involved? On joining a dating site an individual is presented with tasks that are immediately familiar from work – at least from white-collar, professional life. There are questionnaires to be completed, searches to be carried out, and profiles to be assessed. Potential dates must be compared with one another and against the set of necessary and desirable attributes, often

¹ E.g. www.matchmakinginstitute.com

compared to a shopping list of partner qualities (Heino et al., 2010). E-mails must be sent and replied to. Meetings must be arranged, and finally attended in person. In a previous study we argued that the mechanisms of dating sites give rise to instrumentally rational decisions on the part of users; through this analytical framework we suggest that dating services reconfigure relationship seeking as a kind of project management, with the eventual goal the meeting of an appropriate partner. The dater him or herself becomes elevated from chance-bound singleton to expert participant, skilled in the practices of professional, white collar work which can be brought to bear on the dating project.

Work practices must, of course, be worked at, and users of online dating are encouraged to work at finding a relationship online, dedicating a number of hours each day over the course of some months to this goal. The notion of work even spills out into first dates. Both online and off-line services advocate working at finding a new partner attractive, building up a relationship slowly through systematic and carefully managed contact, by e-mail and telephone, for example and thereby discovering, or making apparent, the attractiveness of the person in question. Examples include a series of instructions to “get the most out of online dating”², and the most popular advice on another site entitled “men’s ten biggest complaints about women”³. The standardisation of behaviours is also apparent in advice given by introduction agencies, where the problem of factoring out attraction in the matching process looms large. In this type of service, the advice dispensed also ritualises appropriate behaviours. We suggest that the repositioning attraction as work, and therefore as something within the control and responsibility of users, dating services to avoid problems associated with unreliable and unpredictable nature of human attraction.

Discussion

In this paper we have set out to present an overview of the multifarious practices of valuation at work in dating services, both among users and service providers, online and offline. We have sought to investigate why some attributes are priced, prized and praised; how partners and relationships are seen, what is unseen, and why that is of consequence; what justifications and ‘orders of worth’ are used; and what kind of work is needed to devise exchanges and to settle matters of value. We have presented a conceptual overview of the sector through three analytic lenses – notions of market-based exchange, of symbolic exchange understood

² www.match.com/datingadvice [accessed 12.1.2011]

³ www.eharmony.com [accessed 23.1.2012]

through Bourdieu's conceptual triad of field, capital and habitus, and of work practices absorbed into private lives. In each instance we have attempted to map out this important empirical site for future empirical work, and at the same time to elaborate how, in the context of dating services, one might begin to answer that most beguilingly simple question: is (s)he worth it?

This paper develops theoretical resources that can be deployed to analyse the sociologically significant phenomenon of dating services. Our paper contributes to the project of 'valuography' (Dussauge et al., 2015), recognising valuing as a practical, socially and materially embedded process. Sometimes known as the sociological 'turn to value' (Stark, 2011), the valuographic approach seeks to document how values are achieved in practical interactions. Our conceptual overview of the sector indicates that the valuing of potential partners or relationships is neither given, nor driven by exogenous social norms, but the result of a complex process of social and material configuration.

The paper has used Boltanski and Thevenot's (2006) market, domestic and industrial worlds as distinct theoretical lenses to illustrate the complexities of valuation at work in dating services. These orders of worth have helped illuminate why certain attributes are prized and others ignored. So through the lens of marriage-as-market we see potential partners quantified and evaluated in terms of long-term payoff and in relation to the evaluator. The organizing principle of the 'market world' is competition for rare goods, and individuals are perceived as worthy if they are desirable, tradable, or successful. In other words, while money remains an objective indicator of desirability, other attributes are valorized by their scarcity. While we have suggested that wealth and beauty are terms of little analytic purchase, within the context of the market world, beauty appears to be performatively determined by scarcity, a process exemplified by the success of a few 'hot' individuals on dating websites. The domestic world, on the other hand, is driven by the desire to preserve the advantages of status and the status quo. Examining the *habitus* of those using dating services illuminates processes of valorisation that remain otherwise invisible, appealing to class-based values, appropriate tastes and social hierarchies, operationalized through a focus on external markers of taste, and a fragmentation of the market into specialized service providers. Finally, conceptualising online dating through the frame of the industrial world, recognizes the seepage of (professional) work practices into non-work activities and suggests that a – any – *relationship* is constructed as a valuable achievement in its own right, marking

the successful completion of a work-project and valorizing functionality, efficiency and the avoidance of risk.

Examining the orders of worth also allows us to recognize the role of specialised knowledges – and therefore to the manifestations of power – in the devising of markets, and the settling of what is worth knowing. Boltanski and Thevenot show that what is prized or set as valuable depends upon the orders of worth through which value is enacted. Each analytic lens shows how different knowledges are implicated in the processes of devising carried out by service providers and workers. In the case of market-style arrangements, for example, social-scientific knowledge and engineering expertise is invoked in the construction of the architectures and interfaces of online sites, through which certain attributes are valorized and others excluded (Roscoe & Chillias, 2014). In the case of the domestic world, it is the invisible and unconscious knowledge embodied in habitus that allows those using and providing dating services to decide what is valuable and how it should be valued: to ascertain the suitability of a potential partner, and to read in the markers of class and status the basis of an appropriate match. Finally, the recognition of the appealing safety and predictability of work practices and habits valorizes functional expertise, whether on the part of service provider – manifested, for example, in the appearance of qualifications for match-makers – or on the part of the workers themselves, who are able to deploy the skills from their professional lives to successfully achieve a relationship.

In summary, the question with which we began this paper opens up to reveal complex, overlapping and often competing assessments of worth. Our conceptual examination of dating services shows that, at least in this instance, the assignment of ‘worth’ involves moral and aesthetic, as well as economic, judgements, and offers ways forward for sociologists, students of value, and organizations theorists to develop empirical programmes in an important, yet still under-researched, empirical site.

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