

# SCIENTIFIC AMERICAN

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## Changing the Dating Game

**When women approach men instead of vice versa, the gender difference in selectivity disappears**

By Wray Herbert

Women are much choosier than men when it comes to romance. This is well known, but the reason for this gender difference is unclear. Evolutionary psychologists think it is because back in prehistoric times “dating” was much riskier for women. Men who made an ill-advised choice in the ancient version of a singles bar simply had one lousy night. Women who chose unwisely could end up facing years of motherhood without the critical help that a stable partner would have provided.

That is less true today, yet women remain much more selective. Is this difference a vestige of our early ancestry? Or might it be totally unrelated to reproductive risk, the result of something more modern and mundane? A couple of Northwestern University psychologists, Eli J. Finkel and Paul W. Eastwick, decided to explore this question in an unusual laboratory: a real-life speed-dating event.

### People in Motion

For the uninitiated, speed dating is an increasingly popular way for men and women to meet and find potential partners. Participants attend a sponsored event and go on a series of very brief “dates,” about four minutes each. Typically the women sit scattered around a room, and the men make the rounds. Afterward, both men and women indicate to the sponsor if they would be interested in seeing any of the others again. If two “yeses” match up, they get phone numbers and that’s it. They’re on their own.

Men say “yes” a lot more than women. That is expected, but Finkel and Eastwick had a novel theory about why. Perhaps it could be explained by the simple convention of men standing and approaching—and women sitting passively. There has been a lot of recent work on the mutual influence of body and mind—how we embody our thoughts and emotions. For example, body movements can subconsciously influence people’s attitudes toward another race. In a 2007 study at York University in Canada psychologists found that nonblack participants who were trained to pull a joystick toward them when they saw a picture of a black person subsequently had fewer implicit (subconscious) biases against blacks than people who were trained to push the joystick away or to the left or right. Pulling the joystick was similar, in a psychological sense, to approaching the individuals in the pictures—and when people approach someone, their feelings about that person tend to warm.

Finkel and Eastwick speculated that in speed dating, physically approaching someone might be enough to make the potential date more appealing romantically—and thus, because men usually approach women in such events, to make the men less choosy overall.

They tested this hypothesis in a series of 15 heterosexual speed-dating events, involving 350 young men and women. Each participant went on about 12 dates, but the researchers changed the rules: in seven of the events, the women approached the men, so overall both genders approached each other about equally. After each date, the participants rated their partners for romantic desirability and romantic chemistry. They also rated their own sense of self-confidence on the date. After all the brief dates were over, they decided thumbs up or thumbs down for each candidate.

### Hello, I Love You

The results were a score. As reported in the October 2009 issue of *Psychological Science*, the well-known gender difference vanished when men and women assumed more egalitarian roles—when women made the rounds and men sat, both sexes were equally choosy. This finding is not a complete reversal of the old rule, however; the seated men were not choosier than the traveling women, the way seated women are choosier than men in the traditional speed-dating setup. This suggests that the ancient tendencies still exist but may be less influential than previously thought, because they are also reinforced by arbitrary social norms such as the convention that men usually approach women when there is potential for romance.

What’s more, by asking the participants to rate their self-confidence, the researchers provided further insight into what specifically about the speed-dating setup led both men and women to be more selective when they were seated. The investigators had wondered whether the act of sitting and being approached by a long string of members of the opposite sex made people feel especially desirable and, therefore, justifiably choosier. But they found that those who rotated showed more self-confidence than those who sat, nixing the idea that the sitters’ perception of being in great demand was driving their relative choosiness. Instead simply standing and being on the move boosted both genders’ sense of confidence, which in turn boosted their romantic attraction to the people they approached.

We don’t speed-date our way through real life, of course, but there are all kinds of social conventions based on gender, and these presumably shape romantic feelings and actions. Having men behave more like women and women more like men appears to narrow at least this one gap between the sexes.

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