

Why Light Touching Can Double Your Chances of Getting a Date [Excerpt]

*Editor's note: The following is an excerpt from the new book, **Subliminal: How Your Unconscious Mind Rules Your Behavior**, by Leonard Mlodinow. Copyright © 2012 by Leonard Mlodinow. Published by arrangement with **Pantheon Books**, an imprint of The Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group, a division of Random House, Inc.*

*In a guest post for the SA network blog **Streams of Consciousness**, Mlodinow describes the importance of being social. He also wrote the article, "The Elusive Theory of Everything," with Stephen Hawking in the October 2011 Scientific American.*



Image: Courtesy of Pantheon Books

When I was in high school, the few times I gathered the courage to approach a girl, the experience felt like I was administering a multiple-choice test and she kept answering, "None of the above." I had more or less resigned myself to the fact that a boy who spent his free time reading books on non-Euclidean geometry was not likely to be voted "big man on campus." Then one day when I was in the library looking for a math book, I took a wrong turn and stumbled upon a work whose title went something like *How to Get a Date*. I hadn't realized people wrote instructional books on subjects like that. Questions raced through my mind: Didn't the mere fact that I was interested in such a book mean it would never fulfill the promise of its title? Could a boy who'd rather talk about curved space-time than touchdown passes ever score himself? Was there really a bag of tricks?

The book emphasized that if a girl doesn't know you very well—and that applied to every girl in my high school—you should not expect her to agree to a date, and you shouldn't take the rejection personally. Instead, you should ignore the possibly enormous number of girls who turn you down and keep asking, because, even if the odds are low, the laws of mathematics say eventually your number will come up. Since mathematical laws are my kinds of laws, and I've always believed that persistence is a good life philosophy, I took the advice. I can't say the results were statistically significant, but decades later, I was shocked to find that a group of French researchers essen-

tially repeated the exercise the book had suggested. And they did it in a controlled scientific manner, achieving results that were statistically significant. Furthermore, to my surprise, they revealed a way I could have improved my chance of success.

French culture is known for many great attributes, some of which probably have nothing to do with food, wine, and romance. But regarding the latter, the French are thought to especially excel, and in the experiment in question, they literally made a science of it. The scene was a particularly sunny June day in a pedestrian zone in the city of Vannes, a medium-sized town on the Atlantic coast of Brittany, in the west of France. Over the course of that day, three young and handsome French men randomly approached 240 young women they spotted walking alone and propositioned each and every one of them. To each, they would utter exactly the same words: "Hello. My name's Antoine. I just want to say that I think you're really pretty. I have to go to work this afternoon but I wonder if you would give me your phone number. I'll phone you later and we can have a drink together someplace." If the woman refused, they'd say, "Too bad. It's not my day. Have a nice afternoon." And then they'd look for another young woman to approach. If the woman handed over her number, they'd tell her the proposition was all in the name of science, at which time, according to the scientists, most of the women laughed. The key to the experiment was this: with half the women they propositioned, the young men added a light one-second touch to the woman's forearm. The other half received no touch.