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Mulling the math of romance

By JASON BROWN
Mon, Feb 14 - 3:31 PM

There are some things about relationships I don't get. My spouse, Sondra, takes umbrage when I introduce her as my "first wife," or my "current wife," though both are completely true. Go figure! But I do find math has a lot to say about romance, and, yes, even love.

Beauty is in the eye of the beholder, isn't it? But what is attractive isn't quite so arbitrary. A study has found that people whose bodies and faces are more symmetrical tend to start having sex earlier and have more partners (starfish, which have not only bilateral but rotational symmetries, must do really well).

We humans just appreciate the mathematical pattern inherent in symmetry. There are exceptions, though, to the rule — Lyle Lovett has an asymmetrical face, and he still managed to land Julia Roberts (at least temporarily).

Of course, being mathematically perfect isn't enough to find you the right partner. How connected are you to everyone else? There is a mathematical principle called the "six degrees of separation" between you and any other person (say X) in the vast social network of the world.

There is a short chain of acquaintances connecting both of you. You might know someone who has gone to high school with someone who is best friends with the sister of someone who worked overseas with X.

Social networks also tend to have quite a few "active" individuals, and theoretical epidemiologists are keying in on those when trying to manage the spread of diseases.

But how do you choose the best? Suppose you decide you're going to try to pick the best mate among the next 20 potential spouses you are going to meet.

Once you pick from the romance tree, you're done (so to speak).

You could decide ahead of time to marry say the 13th person you meet, but the 13th person would only be the best of the lot five per cent of the time (one of 20 equals five per cent). Can you do better?

Indeed, math helps again, and it turns out that the optimal choice is to let about 37 per cent of the list of potential candidates go by, and then pursue the next one who is better than any of the previous ones.

That raises your chances of picking the best one from five per cent to about 37 per cent.

If you are fortunate enough to have already found your better half (with me it's my better 56 per cent), then you might be able to look forward to a romantic time on Valentine's Day.

This brings me around to some recent studies on sex. A recent news headline blared that

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older men can learn about safe sex from the younger ones, as it was quoted that 80 per cent of adolescent males used condoms, while only 25 per cent of men in general reported doing so.

But looking at the original study, I found that the conclusions were not so clear. While about two-thirds of the older men didn't use condoms, about 54.5 per cent of the older males were in committed relationships (married or common-law), and hence had less need for condoms than the teenagers.

So the relevant lack of condom use might be only $66.6\% - 54.4\% = 12.2\%$ of older men out of the 45.6 per cent who aren't in committed relationships, and this is about 27 per cent, which is not a lot different from the adolescents.

But back to love. Whether your heart is rational or irrational (like the square root of 2), it's a wonderful ride. To paraphrase an old saying, love is like math — how can something so simple be so complicated?

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