

PRESS RELEASE

IF CHEMISTRY CAN'T MAKE A GREAT DATE, PHYSICS WILL!



Screen idols like Jude Law & Sienna Miller may be sub-conscious 'Super-Daters' for many of us.

LONDON: 11TH August 2005: Science may have given us the Internet, the mobile phone and the digital camera, but it can't find us a husband or wife – or can it?

Oxford undergraduate Richard Ecob believes he's close to solving the timeless riddle of 'Mr & Mrs Right'. Using a combination of mathematics and computer modelling, he's analysed the dating game and discovered that it's actually physics – not chemistry - which makes the earth move for most of us.

Richard, and his supervisors Dave Smith and Neil Johnson, set out to challenge the belief that modern life makes us more sophisticated but also choosier, and therefore more likely to dump our partners. He quickly saw that anyone's romantic life can be reduced to a series of transitions, or 'transit states', e.g. 'twice-divorced and now single'; but the breakthrough came when he realised that the labelling system he'd devised was the same one used for atoms going through successive stages of radioactive decay.

Richard wrote a computer programme in which he created an artificial society of partner-seeking-people called 'software singles'. Studying software singles has told him a lot about the ratio of singles to non-singles in a wide variety of circumstances, and he's made some remarkable discoveries. For example, when he looked at the effectiveness of multiple dating, he discovered that it doesn't actually matter if we're all becoming more sophisticated (i.e. acquiring a longer list of preferences) - we're still just as likely to end up in a relationship. Indeed, it turns out that as long as you are willing to accept a partner who satisfies a particular fraction of your criteria, then lengthening or shortening your 'ideal' list has no effect on your chances of ending up in a relationship.

He also compared the effectiveness of 'multiple daters' (people who move rapidly through a social network), with those who stay in one place and wait for others to move through. He found that you get the best results by staying in one place, but it's got to be the right place and the right places will change with time!

He then looked at the phenomenon of 'Super-Daters' - these are daters who match most people's lists (in other words they've got 'everything'), but they tend not to stay in relationships for very long. Society may not value 'Super-Daters' much, but Richard and his colleagues believe they may actually make us happier! Super-Daters can break up weak relationships; forcing the victims to search more widely. They rarely find someone who has 'everything', but they often find a better partner than the one they left! Screen idols like Jude Law or Sienna Miller may even act as sub-conscious Super-Daters for many of us - we long for them, but know it will never happen.

Professor Neil Johnson, who heads up the Complex Systems research group at Oxford University in which Richard did his work, believes that these findings can be applied not only to personal relationships, but also to business and political ones; and so he's entered Richard's project for the national SET (Science, Engineering & Technology Student of the Year) Awards, which will be presented in, London's Guildhall in September.

Note to Editors: The SET Awards are Britain's most important and prestigious awards for science and engineering undergraduates.

With the support of Britain's leading scientific institutions, employers, and the government, the Awards have become the "Oscars" of British technology education, and entries are received from the best science and engineering students at all Britain's leading universities.

Much more than a purely academic honour, the awards have become a national institution culminating in a spectacular, moving and entertaining ceremony. Each September, hundreds of key influencers from the worlds of business, government, academia and the media gather at London's Guildhall to see Britain's most talented young people tasting the limelight for the first (but probably not the last) time in their careers.

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