

## Young Women's Dating Behavior: Why/Why Not Date a Nice Guy?

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The purpose of this study was to investigate why some women report a desire to date nice guys but prefer dating jerks. Specifically, young women's dating choices based on their reasons for dating in general and the attractive/unattractive traits that they perceive that a man possesses were explored. Popular texts offer evidence that young women may/may not select nice guys as dating partners because nice guys may/may not be able to provide them with what they want from their dating experiences. Scholarly texts offer evidence that the answer may lie in how the young woman perceives the nice guy—does he possess attractive or unattractive personality traits? The results of the present study suggest that reasons for dating (i.e., *not* wanting physical contact, wanting stimulating conversation, and wanting an exclusive relationship) and perceived personality traits (i.e., sweet/nice and physically attractive) influence a young woman's desire to date a nice guy, and that perceived personality traits are better predictors of her choice of a man to date than are reasons for dating.

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Women are not people that you have honest, reciprocal relationships with. You "keep" a woman. You "play the game" with a woman. There are certain things contrary to the spirit of true, honest companionship that a guy must do in order to attract and have women, and no woman will ever love you for who you are, no matter how nice a guy you happen to be. You must first have A, B, and C... regardless of the fact that A, B, and C (insert social status, money, etc.) have nothing at all to do with what a person is actually like.

*Anonymous Man*<sup>3</sup>

A common refrain among men is the observation that women do not like (or more appropriately,

do not want to date) nice guys. Popular cultural texts that range from Kuriansky's (1996) *The Complete Idiot's Guide to Dating* to Internet articles such as Overthelimit.com's "The Myth of the Nice Guy" (Guy in a Trenchcoat, 2002) suggest that women claim they want a "nice guy" because they believe that that is what is expected of them when, in reality, they want the so-called "challenge" that comes with dating a not-so-nice guy. Scholarly texts seem to echo this general claim, as does the opinion of the anonymous man.

The gentle, compassionate man who reads magazine surveys indicating that his qualities are the very ones that most women prefer in a mate may be the same man who is repeatedly turned down by women who seek the company of more atavistic males... Women go for heroes while saying they want vulnerability and later try to persuade their partners to become more sensitive and vulnerable, rather than initially pursuing sensitive and vulnerable men (Desrochers, 1995, p. 376).

However, when women are asked about the subject, they almost always claim to desire a nice

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guy...so long as he is not *too* nice (Gray, 1997). What accounts for these contradictions? Are women both attracted to and repelled by nice guys? In short, why or why not date a nice guy?

Scholarly researchers who have attempted to shed light on the nice guy dilemma based their conclusions on one of three theoretical frameworks—evolutionary theory, sexual strategies theory, and social role theory. All three perspectives have produced somewhat consistent results with regard to mating preferences, however they fall short of accounting for factors critical to the nice guy phenomenon as it is articulated in popular culture. For instance, evolutionary theory assumes that young dating individuals are in a perpetual “ensure reproductive success” mode (i.e., to ensure the production of healthy offspring and the acquisition of resources to invest in those offspring; Schmitt, Couden, & Baker, 2001). However, according to anecdotal accounts, young women seem to be more interested in *unsuccessful* reproduction when in “casual dating” and “nonmarital, committed dating” modes (Beland, 2003; Moore & Gould, 2001).

Sexual strategies theory moderates the preoccupation with reproductive success by placing this tendency of dating individuals in a temporal context. That is, according to this theory, women develop short-term dating strategies such as using that temporal context to assess the long-term potential of a current partner (Buss & Schmitt, 1993). Unfortunately, this perspective does not explain the anecdotal reality that nice guys seem to be chosen often for transitional dating and nothing more even though they demonstrate long-term mate potential (i.e., being kind and generous with their time and money; Wills, 2000). Social roles theory assumes that individuals are socialized to conform to stereotypic dating/mating expectations such as women’s preference for men with maximum earning potential for long-term unions and men’s preference for physically attractive women for short-term unions (Doosje, Rojahn, & Fischer, 1999). The problem with social roles theory is that it assumes traditional dating/mating expectations (i.e., women are predisposed to wanting long-term relationships) and negates the more contemporary dating/mating orientations available to women, which range from purely sexual one-night stands (often spent in the company of “jerks”) to completely asexual companion dating for which nice guys seem anecdotally to be destined (Williams, 1999).

The purpose of this study was to investigate why women report a desire to date nice guys but prefer to date “jerks.” Specifically, young women’s dating choices based on their reasons for dating in general and the attractive/unattractive traits that they perceive that a man possesses were explored. This issue was approached inductively and phenomenologically rather than deductively and theoretically. That is, the likelihood of dating a nice guy or a “jerk” was treated as an inferred event because it is related to a set of actions/interactions/perceptions (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Thus, emphasis was placed on both popular accounts and academic explanations and conceptualizations of the nice guy phenomenon in order to demystify it, rather than rely on theoretical frameworks that do not seem to “get at” the problem adequately.

A first step toward demystifying the nice guy phenomenon is to understand the role of dating within the development of the romantic interpersonal relationship process. In *Venus and Mars on a Date*, Gray (1997) discussed dating in terms of a five-step strategy that moves romantic partners toward more committed relationships. He indicated that dating is a means of determining whether potential romantic partners can and will meet each other’s long-term relationship needs. Knapp’s (1984) relationship stages/phases approach provides an interpersonal communication foundation for Gray’s popular interpretation of dating and relationship development without the “long-term” stipulation. Knapp’s model describes relationships in terms of three phases (coming together, maintenance, and coming apart) in which dating plays a significant role during initiation, experimentation, and intensification—the coming together stages in which the participants meet, exchange information about themselves, spend time together, and become a couple (Alder & Rodman, 2003). Baxter and Bullis (1986) built upon Knapp’s “coming together—coming apart” model by investigating turning points—events that are related to positive and negative changes in relationships. Among other things, respondents in their investigation identified the first meeting and the first date (i.e., the first time the respondents regarded themselves as going on a boy–girl date) as types of “get to know you time” events with positive relationship consequences (Baxter & Bullis, 1986).

Finally, the significance of a successful first date to relationship escalation is highlighted when first date scripts are taken into account. Laner and Ventrone (2000) found that first date scripts among