Exploring Virtual Connections?

Sociological Perspectives of Intimacy in Cyberspace

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Abstract: This paper seeks to explore the growing phenomenon of online intimacy and dating through a critical sociological lens. It is evident that an increasing number of people today are going online to find, develop and/or maintain intimate relationships, yet to date sociologists have largely ignored this phenomenon. This is significant, especially as the very nature of online interaction is necessarily social and thus, should be a valid subject of sociological inquiry. In this paper, we call for a debate about online intimacy and dating as part of a wider aim to redraw the landscape of cyberspace as a fundamentally social and, a real space, worthy of inquiry in its own right. We maintain that the growing and divergent use of technologies for online intimacy and dating is an integral site of the social. Further, we suggest that it is dynamically contradictory and multiple. As sociologists we need to develop complex readings to allow for these often simultaneous and yet conflicting reconfigurations of online intimacy and relationships. This paper contributes to a much-needed debate about an ever-increasing and significant area of everyday life.

Introduction

This paper seeks to explore the growing phenomenon of online intimacy and dating through a critical sociological lens. In this era of late modernity with the new globalised economies, individual and social life can now be said to be characterised by shifts in the type and form (from hierarchies to networks) of both social structures and relationships, with its resulting forms of individual risk and new forms of intimacy and interaction (Beck 1999; Castells 2000; Giddens 1992; Jamieson 1998). Coupled with the advent and extensive use of new forms of information and communication technologies (ICT) in all spheres of social life, the boundaries between the public and the private, the social and the individual and more significantly, the real and the virtual have become far more blurred. There has thus been a
profound social change, influenced by the process of globalisation in its widest and yet, also in the most individualised sense.

Historically, sociology as a discipline has been able to make sense of different sets of transformations and today, it is even more clearly positioned to make sense of social changes. Sociology developed in a time where science was given prominence over human reason and today, society is now part of a shift towards what Beck (1999) states, as a time where ‘society has become a lab where no-one is in charge’. Belief systems are no longer about grand narratives but are based around the construction of networks and individual biographies. Further, just as there were pessimistic and optimistic views of the technologies of the Industrial Revolution, so too are there polarised views of technologies in this digital period. Nonetheless, we assert that a number of traditional and contemporary critical sociological perspectives can still be applied to our understanding of ICT today.

In addition, we maintain that technological developments cannot be defined as neutral in terms of its design, creation or implementation (Henry 1995, 1998). Nor should the concept of technology be perceived of as merely a postmodern or Anglo-centric, Western phenomenon. Sociologists should regard the role and impact of technology as a significant subject worthy of analysis and be able to draw upon existing critical perspectives of technology, as well as devise new ones in ways which contextualise technology and allow for the varied, complex and contradictory consequences of technology for society and the individual. It is against this backdrop that we explore the phenomenon of online intimacy and dating.
The exponential rise of communications technologies alongside an increasingly networked and globalized society has led to significant changes to the nature of intimacy in everyday life. Yet, there has been a negligible response by sociologists to seek, describe and understand these new social changes (a few exceptions—Albright and Conran 1995, Gilding 2002, Lea and Spears 1995, Schofield Clark 1998, Wellman and Gulia 1996; Wildermuth 2001). Instead, social research to date has tended to focus on either a positive or negative perspective—where ICT are posited as either emancipatory (Rheingold 1992, 1993, 1994) or as discriminatory (Hochschild 1994 and Strahern 1992).

However, these constructions are far too simplistic. They either reinforce a technological deterministic role which assumes that: a) the technology is so dominant that it alone determines any effect or b) that the technology can be regarded as neutral and in some way can be used in a more radically different and liberating way. As Matei and Ball-Rokeach (2001) point out, these polemic viewpoints both tend to overstress the ability of technology to override entrenched social norms and behaviour. Thus, depending on which side of the positive or negative debate one sits, there are implications for how technological impacts are evaluated. Admittedly, there has been some interesting scholarly work on the more general aspects of online technologies (for a detailed overview see Barraket & Henry-Waring 2004). Nonetheless, Matei and Ball-Rokeach (2001), remind us that we need to employ a broader sociological perspective, which examines the interplay of social, cultural and technological factors— one that treats technologies as products firmly rooted in social...
A growing number of people with access to technology are going online to find, develop and/or maintain their intimate relationships, yet sociology in Australia and elsewhere has largely ignored the phenomenon of online dating and intimacy. This is remarkable, especially considering the fact that the nature of online interaction is necessarily social and thus, should be a significant subject of scrutiny to sociologists. Instead, the bulk of research on online dating to date is focused in psychology or more generally, anecdotally, through magazines and self-help books and websites. To understand intimacy and online dating sociologically, we must initially at least, draw from a selection of some of the perspectives used to describe social and personal life in the postmodern era on one hand, and relate these to critical and holistic perspectives of technology on the other.

The Rise of New Social and Intimate Relationships

The rise of new forms of social relationships on individual and collective levels has characterised the global post-modern period (Castells 2000, Giddens 1992 and Beck 1999). Giddens’ (1992) describes a new sexuality in the global postmodern era, which has implications for the notion of intimacy. In contrast to previous periods, Giddens (1992) refers to this new type of sexuality, as the ‘plastic sexuality’. It is de-centred and ‘freed from the needs of reproduction’ (1992: 2). Instead of having ties due to obligation, people are now focused on developing relationships, which are more individualised. These relationships are a type of ‘pure relationship’ based on intimacy, between equals, and
voluntary, away from kin and community obligations. For Giddens (1992), then, intimacy in a pure relationship is about knowing and understanding – a shared and intense form of interaction with an emphasis on reflexivity.

Jamieson (1998) also acknowledges the rise of rise of intimate relationships and specifically argues how they are as important for notions of the individual as well as the community and society as a whole. Jamieson (1998) describes the most recent type of intimacy as ‘disclosing intimacy’ and argues that it is culturally specific based around notions of empathy, trust and understanding, (and sometimes, loving, caring and sharing) rather than close association and privileged forms of knowledge. Relationships in this post-modern era then have changed, nothing is assumed and unlike in the past, the phases of adulthood are a site of constant struggle and negotiation. It is our contention that these changes in the type and duration of intimate relationships offline have also been reflected, shaped and/or reinforced by the ways in which people use technology online. Initially and anecdotally so far, we have found that people use a variety of ICTs as a way of identifying, accessing potential partners for friendships, and casual or more enduring relationships. We also note as Jamieson (1998) argues, intimacy and relationships are more complex than ‘pure’ or ‘disclosing’ types of intimacy - love, practical caring and sharing remain important attributes of relationships too. Throughout our research then, we intend to reflect the complexity of intimacy and relationships in ways which allow for multiple and dynamic readings.

**Online Dating and Intimacy**
As stated above, the small number of academic studies that exist on online dating, mainly come from a psychology, communications perspective. However, a few more have emerged from within the social sciences such as Byrne and Lenton (2001) - a Canadian study indicated that over 1 million people tried an online dating site; Parks and Floyd’s (1996) study on online newsgroups found that over 60% has established a personal relationship with their internet group and about 8% formed intimate relationships and Peris et al (2002) found that online relationships formed via Chat rooms were healthy and complemented face-face relationships. However, there is still a dearth of empirical sociological research on online dating and intimacy (Barraket and Henry-Waring 2004). Suffice it to say that the emerging field of research on intimate online relationships has resulted in what Wildermuth (2001) observes as a lack of a coherent core upon which to build theory. Our current project in progress – ‘Virtual Connections: Exploring Intimacies in Cyberspace’, aims to bring this gap and to provide an example of grounded empirical sociological research specifically on online dating and intimacy in Australia, from which we can begin to make theoretical inroads to this neglected area of social inquiry.

**Virtual Connections?**

We seek to explore how online dating blurs the boundaries between the *public* and *private* and the *virtual* and the *real* (Moody 2001). By focusing on notions of embodiment and disembodiment (Haraway 1991, Herring 1993, 1994, Kramarce 1998 and Turkle 1995), place and space (Massey 1995; Soja 1996, 1997; Stanley 2001 and van de Vall 2002) scholars have tended to separate cyberspace from the ‘real’ world and in so doing, have created a schism that has made it difficult to connect real life and cyberspace together. Yet,
the online is highly connected to the offline. The consequences are real, emotions are felt, and trust is given.

We do not regard cyberspace as a separate or uniformed sphere particularly for the diverse users of technology (for women - Schofield Clark 1998, Boyd 2001; specific ‘racial’/ethnic groups - Orbuch and Fine 2003; Gajjala 1998, 2002; sexuality - Chan and Cheung 2004; Ferris and Roper 2002; Nip 2004). Further, we assert that cyberspace is a real place and space, which is part of the social world (Massey 1995). As van de Vall (2002) states, ‘Cyberspace is in fact only metaphorically spatial’ (2002:145). Indeed, cyberspace,

...invades and transforms the physical space of our embodied location in innumerable ways and provides immersive environments in which one can lose oneself completely (van de Vall, 2002: 141)

Cyberspace and related technologies are then in our view, a part of a wide, rich and deep landscape, which is by its very nature, heterogeneous (Kolko, Nakamura, and Rodman 2000). As Stanley (2001) also asserts, our engagement with cyberspace cannot be seen in isolation with us simply in/on line and offline – they are crucially interrelated – it is a socially real space. In addition, Soja (1996, 1997) advocates the notion of third space – a lived space which is contradictory, multiple, emancipatory and oppressive – a site of struggle, site of hybridity and Cresswell (2002) states that ‘place’ in the postmodern era should not be viewed as fixed, but suggests, ‘places are never complete, finished or bounded but are always becoming – in process’ (2002: 20). These are useful concepts and ideas with which to seek and understand cyberspace as an inherently social landscape, where online dating and intimacy exists and filters through to everyday life.
Our research project, ‘Virtual Connections? Exploring Intimacies in Cyberspace’, started earlier this year, is according to our knowledge, one of the first, to specifically explore online dating in Australia. The aims of the project are to:

- Map the nature and scope of online dating trends in Australia
- Explore the effects of online information and communication technologies (ICT) on intimate connections, both off and online; and
- Develop a robust theoretical framework and refined methodology for further research in this emerging area.

The significance of the current project is that it seeks to address some of the critical gaps explored in this paper.

**Conclusions**

In this paper, we have sought to inject into this much maligned arena, a debate about the very nature of intimacy online as part of a wider aim to redraw the landscape of cyberspace as a fundamentally social and thus, a real space, worthy of sociological inquiry in its own right. Furthermore, our orientation, theoretically and empirically in this paper and in our current project, is to deconstruct notions of cyberspace as a homogenous whole and examine the many ways and reasons why people go on line to find intimate partners/relationships. Specifically, we aim to focus upon perspectives which reveal the highly contextualised and multiple setting of technology as a crucial and inter-related part of social life – thus ensuring that technology is neither posited as simply the problem or the solution. We maintain that online interaction particularly those which involve intimacy are
part of the real world, not separate from it. The consequences for people who choose to go online and to be intimate are real, not imaginary.

This paper, therefore proposes a view of cyberspace as an integral site of the social – dynamically contradictory and multiple. As a result, this paper calls for a new and much needed debate and research into an ever-increasing and significant area of everyday life.

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Endnotes

1 We thank Meagan Tyler for her comprehensive research assistance on the literature review for this project.
3 Defined as those initiated online and maintained primarily online.
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