

Looking for Love. Construction of Gender in Self-narratives on datingireland.com

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Syftet med denna artikel är att granska hur genuskillnaden konstrueras i elektroniska kontaktannonser. Materialet är hämtat från en irländsk sajt och det består av 20 självbeskrivningar, varav 10 är skrivna av kvinnor och 10 av män i åldersgruppen 40–55. Materialet analyseras med hjälp av nio kategorier, som baserar sig på Pirkko Muikku-Werners kategorisering av uppgifterna i kontaktannonser. Resultatet förstärker den traditionella uppfattningen att kvinnor mer än män tenderar att se sig i förhållande till andra människor. Samtidigt framhävs kvinnors agens: kvinnor konstruerar sig som aktiva, skickliga och självständiga människor. Däremot uttrycker sig män i fler kategorier än kvinnor, vilket tyder på att maskulinitet, trots kvinnors ökade möjligheter, fortfarande erbjuder ett bredare livsutrymme.

Keywords: personal ad, gender, femininity, masculinity

1 Introduction

Printed personal advertisements, published in a newspaper or other printed publication, date back to the 17th century England and 18th century Germany (Muikku-Werner 2009: 28). The traditional, 3–4 lines long compact and informative printed ad is still probably the type of personal ad that we are most familiar with. However, personal ads – both printed and electronic – are not read by contact seekers only; they are also the object of keen academic interest: in Finland, for example Henna Pesonen (1995) and particularly Pirkko Muikku-Werner (2002; 2003; 2009) are known for their studies of printed ads. Moreover, the articles in *Digirakkaus* (2004) edited by Ulla Paunonen and Jaakko Suominen, besides taking different approaches to partner search on the internet and virtual dating also deal with several other aspects of love and information technology. Internationally, personal ads have been studied for example by Richard Koestner and Ladd Wheeler (1988), Justine Coupland (1996), Celia Shalom (1997), Carol Marley (2000), Voon Chin Pua, Joseph Hopper and Obed Vazquez (2002), and Donald S. Strassberg and Steven Holty (2003).

In the 1990s, personal ads started to move to the internet, and nowadays countless of sites provide matchmaking services of various types from sex partners to pen pals. Some of the sites are liable to charge, many of them are free. The transfer to the net has naturally caused changes in the ads. Firstly, advertising space has grown considerably. On datingireland.com, the visitor is first provided a short introduction to the personal data of the advertiser with an automatic match calculator. Behind next click, the visitor finds a number of ready-made questions about the advertiser him/herself and the desired match. The part of the profile that most resembles a traditional personal ad is titled *Her* or *His Narratives* depending on the sex of the owner of the profile. This part of the profile contains freely written descriptions of the advertiser and the desired match. Uploading a picture is also possible.

According to Coupland (1996: 193–195), a traditional printed personal ad is often organised as follows:¹ First comes the *advertiser's* information, for example sex, age, married status, characteristics, sexual orientation, profession etc. Second, the desired match (*target*) is described using similar types of attributes. Third, the *goals* of the potential relationship are defined, for example romance, friendship, no ties relationship, company for a certain purpose etc. Sometimes the ad contains special *comments* like reasons for advertising, earlier experiences, descriptions of life situation and the like. Contact information (*reference*) in the form of pen name, code number or some other identification is the last point. Despite the new medium with all the possibilities of electronic advertising, the basic elements remain the same on datingireland.com, although the amount of information is greater, and it is no longer presented in linear order because it can be accessed by clicking the links randomly.

Partner search advertising, both printed and virtual, is immediately recognizable as a gendered discourse structured upon difference, i.e. categorization of the advertiser profiles according to sex.² As such, dating sites on the net can be studied as a social prac-

¹ For further generic aspects see Pirkko Muikku-Werner, *Tositarkoituksella. Näkökulmia kontakti-ilmoituksiin* (2009). Helsinki: Suomalaisen kirjallisuuden seura.

² This applies equally to both heterosexual and queer sites, because gender difference structures the gender system independently of any individual interpretation of gender.

tice through which values and assumptions of gender are both cemented and reconstructed. This has been done for example by Susanna Paasonen (2004: 32), who pays attention to the regulative force of the heterosexual norm on the dating sites independently of whether the participants are homo- or heterosexual.³

This study is a contribution to the study of gender in dating ads published on the net. My aim is to look at how women and men narrate themselves in their profiles and thus construct themselves as desirable partners. What kind of attributes of the self, the Ideal Match and the potential relationship are taken up? How do these attributes construct the advertiser in terms of femininity and masculinity, and eventually: how is the heterosexual norm produced in the narratives?

2 Material: Narratives of the self and the ideal match

My material consists of 20 most recently submitted profiles of 10 women and 10 men in the age group 40–55.⁴ Because of the limitations of this paper, I only concentrate on the self-narratives of the profile-owners. Quite often these narratives follow Coupland's (1996: 189) structural model with not only a description of the self but also of the ideal mate and even some expectations regarding the relationship, although another slot is reserved for this information in the profile. The self-narratives are short autobiographies, written in the first person, and in the present material, their lengths vary from 19 to 186 words.⁵

3 Method

Pirkko Muikku-Werner (2002: 219; 2003: 333–336) has defined 13 social categories to classify the contents of personal ads. These categories, in slightly modified forms, function as the basic methodological starting point for this study. The category of *age*, for example has been omitted in this study. Since the selection of material was

³ Paasonen (2004: 23–34) analyses American netdating guides as manuscripts for a happy life and the internet as a “romance machine” with the help of which this perfection can be attained.

⁴ In the material, women's ages vary between 41 and 53 and men's between 43 and 52. The average for women is 47 and for men 46 years. The profiles were retrieved on the 15th of December 2009.

⁵ The average number of words is 64 in women's narratives and 55 in men's narratives.

based on age, this attribute does not function as an analytical category. Moreover, because a compulsory attribute in the profiles, it is only rarely mentioned in the narratives. Second, Muikku-Werner distinguishes the *prerequisites* for the desired relationship. These can either impair or advance the relationship such as marital status, children or working hours. Under *nationality*, Muikku-Werner situates all attributes that refer to both nationality and place of residence. I have expanded Muikku-Werner's category of *knowledge* somewhat and renamed it as *professionality*. In addition to references to the level of education and intelligence, the category of *professionality* also comprises references to vocations and professions and other ways of making a living, even unemployment. The category *economic situation* comprises references like "economically independent". *Skills*, quite simply, refers to the different things that people can do, for example the person can sing or speak French. I have merged Muikku-Werner's categories of relatively stable *character traits* and situation bound *attitudes* into one single class of *personal characteristics* because sometimes distinguishing the two is quite difficult. *Way of life* is another category that I have expanded beyond the original scope: in addition to references to physical condition, drinking and smoking habits and the like, the category, in this study comprises also what is told about how people relate to life, what they do, enjoy and dislike. *Appearance* is a relatively unambiguous category. In the category of *sensuality*, I have placed all references to sexuality, including sexual orientation and health. The category titled *similarity* contains all the material somehow related to reciprocity, for example wishes regarding the future relationship or invitations to make contact. *Other* is the category for the otherwise uncategorized material. (2002: 219; 2003: 333–336)

4 Constructing the self as an object of desire

Language is a social tool, a way of constructing and communicating our identities (Wardhaug 2006: 12; Crystal 1997: 38–47). As such, language also participates in the construction of gender as a regulatory discourse both on the collective level and on the level of the individual. Values and practices govern our ways of relating to and understanding what femininity and masculinity consist of, and under what premises we are to live our lives as either women or men. Because gendering is something we cannot

escape, how we express our selves in language – and how other people “read” our ways of expressing our selves – is therefore always gendered in one way or another. In the following, I will trace some aspects of language that in my reading of the research material (based on the categories presented above), construct femininity and masculinity in terms of gender difference. In the final part of the article, I present a brief sketch of the points of how gender becomes represented in the self-narratives.

Both men and women mention a number of *prerequisites* in their narratives. Only women refer to their marital status (“divorced for 5 years”; “not long widowed”). Moreover, only women refer to emotional and social restrictions like fear of another broken heart or their friends (“have a varied group of friends who are a constant source of fun”) or children (“have two grandchildren and three boys and two daughters”). Both men and women mention practical matters regarding availability (“tied up during the week, weekends available”; “available during the daytime and during the weekdays; can travel anywhere in munster”). *Nationality* is mentioned only in two narratives. In both of them, a reference to the place of residence is made (“I have lived in UK for 12 years now...in West Sussex; based in co cork”). Moreover, in the narrative by an originally South African woman, nationality as a marker of cultural difference becomes an issue of importance, because it was on this difference the advertiser bases her whole project of looking for a partner. In her narrative, she relies on South African expressions to communicate nationality (for example “*gatwol* of the local content” meaning fed up with, upset with) which operate as keys to all of those who recognize the words. She also mentions her disappointment with local men and states that she is “comfortable only with ex South Africans”. In her narrative, through the intersection of nationality and gender, her identity, as well as the masculinity of the desired match becomes constructed as something special and different from the surrounding Englishness.

Professionality is not referred to often in the narratives. In the two narratives by women in which the question is taken up, independence and specialist status are emphasized (“I am a professional person, work in London and run my own ship in West Sussex; I am a writer/teacher...”). Men are equally tight-lipped regarding their professions. There is only one mention of professional careers in the narratives, which also refers to

independence and professionalism (“self employed engineer”). Only women mention their special *skills*. All the attributes mentioned relate in different ways to traditional femininity. Social skills (“good conversationalist”) and empathy (“great listener”) are traditionally female virtues. Domestic skills (“excellent cook”) and culture-related skills (“amateur soprano”) are naturalized constituents of traditional femininity the meanings of which change is the agent is a man. As regards *economic situation*, economic success is not emphasised in the narratives. Financial independence is mentioned only once in the narrative of one woman. Is this a characteristic that constructs contemporary femininity as different from earlier times? Contemporary women are financially independent up to the degree that mentioning a self evident fact is no longer necessary when looking for a partner.

Personal characteristics and *way of life* are the categories with by far most attributes. Within *personal characteristics*, both men and women refer to general positive character attributes and describe themselves as actors in social situations. The number of positive character attributes used by men to describe what they are like is higher, whereas women tend to place themselves more often in relation to other people. This they do also in more positive terms than men. Women describe themselves as honest or very sincere, open-minded, gentle or rather good-natured, calm or quiet, or just in general having many great qualities. Emotional independence is also mentioned together with “great sense of humour”. Men’s positive character attributes are more numerous. They refer to themselves as being besides honest, also easy going or a “relaxed person”. Attributes that we would associate with femininity are also mentioned in the narratives (“quiet”, “dreamy”, “thoughtful”, “compassionate”, “gentle”, “warm by nature”, “romantic”). Creative and passionate can either be general attributes or they can refer to sexuality. “Assertive” and “strong willed” are naturalized constituents of masculinity, and the attribute “spiritual” – which appears in one narrative with the further elaboration “and enjoy deeper things in life” – echoes an age-old association with masculinity and high religiousness and philosophy. Men also defined themselves as “optimistic”, “playful” and “fun”.

Women emphasise the perspective of others in their references to themselves as social actors. They say for example that they are “great fun to be with as part of a couple or a crowd”, “easy to get along with”, “all round great person to know”, “people who get to know me will appreciate my good humour, friendship, loyalty and trust”. Men refer to themselves as social actors more rarely, and only once the perspective of the other is explicitly visible and even then in rationalistic terms, not suggesting emotional involvement (“interesting to talk to”). Otherwise, the writers of the narratives assess themselves in a sympathetic way as “very shy” and “very friendly”.

The category of *way of life* has the most profuse content as regards both the number of attributes and variation. Both men’s and women’s references can be divided into five subcategories that are 1) doing active things 2) socializing 3) culture 4) nature 5) life, past and values. The difference in communicating different activities as part of their ways of life between women and men is the level of specificity. Women refer explicitly to the individual activities that they engage in, whereas men are more general. Because of this, women not only give an impression of more variety in their repertoires but also of a more active life-style. Women go rock climbing, horse riding, hiking, training for ultra-marathon in Sahara, swimming, cycling, walking, scuba-diving or walking cats and dogs, whereas a man may state that he is an “ex rugby sports person”, “goes to the gym”, plays the “occasional golf” or “love[s] the great outdoors [and] most sports”.

Socializing seems to be important in women’s self narratives. It is an attribute they want to attach to their life-styles and thereby express that they either have friends and/or that they enjoy other people’s company. That they “love socializing”, “like to socialize generally” and “enjoy (...) meeting new and interesting people” or even “tired of the routine day out, prefer a party at home with great company” articulate their desire to present themselves as by no means socially defective and therefore desperate for company. Expressions like “love to laugh and make other people laugh” refer to good sense of humour and sociability and have a similar kind of function: to express that the advertiser is not a bore and therefore without a partner. Only one advertiser includes her family into her way of life (“work hard for my career and my family”). Men define their social relations in ways that do not differ greatly from women, but the number of refer-

ences was not as high as in women's narratives. Men "like friends", "enjoy good company", "enjoy spending time with good friends and Family" or "like good night out". Instead of references to their GSH and jolly disposition, however, they "appreciate interesting conversation, opinion and ideas" and do "talking about anything except politics, most sports". The lower number of references to social relations in men's narratives calls for an interpretation that autonomy and independence remain central constituents of contemporary masculinity. Moreover, the two men who specify interesting conversation and/or talking as an aspect in their social relations construct their narrative identities above the general reference to "having fun with friends" and, thus, exemplify the paradox of male speech: on the one hand, they refute the cultural myth of the silent man. On the other hand, however, they consolidate the male privilege of speech.⁶

In the area of *culture*, women seem to be more inclined to list out their interests, which suggests that compared with men, women seem to construct their identities more in relation to culture, both popular culture and higher forms. Reading, going to the theatre, visiting stately homes and going abroad are among the things mentioned. Moreover, loving soap operas and interest in vintage films and stars (Tyrone Power and Mario Lanza) are also mentioned. In the self-narratives of men, cultural interests are mentioned only twice ("enjoy Arts"; "love reading"), which suggests that men are either not interested in culture or they do not think their interests construct their identities to such a degree that it would be relevant to mention them when looking for a partner. *Nature* was explicitly mentioned as an object of interest once both in women's ("love animals") and men's ("enjoy nature, Animals") narratives, but there are several indirect mentions in the subcategory of *doing active things* in the form of hobbies.

Either explicit or implicit references to life values can be found in both women's and men's narratives. Regarding *life and values*, the approaches by women and men differ. Only women use general positive expressions like "enjoy life" and "love life". A posi-

⁶ The "maleness" of language and meaning have been the objects of discussion for a long time, and studies on the subject proliferate. One of the earliest of such contributions was Dale Spender's *Man Made Language* (1980) – nowadays designated the status of a classic – in which Spender states that one of the most pervasive and pernicious semantic rules in operation in language is that of the male-as-norm (<http://www.marxists.org/reference/subject/philosophy/works/ot/spender.htm>).

tive approach to life can be expressed in the following way: “very positive outlook, no time for negative people – life is too short for negativity”. In women’s narratives, self-reliance and integrity are also expressed in explicit terms. References like “know what I want in life” and “don’t tolerate bullshit” differ greatly from what men write in their narratives. The pragmatic approach expressed in women’s narratives is very little present in those of men. Although men, too, mention attributes like “goal directed” or that “[I] love what I do”, their narratives also include references to softer values in expressions like “enjoy deeper things in life” and “think about life and pray a lot”.

Men, in their self-descriptions, seem to be more liable to references to *appearance* than women. Only one woman touches upon the subject, describing herself in quite cryptic terms as “cute in the physical and proverbial sense”. Men, by contrast, use either general terms like “attractive” or “very handsome guy”, or mention their height or the colour of their hair or eyes quite specifically. An interesting single example is a reference in one narrative in which the writer points out that he is “physically 15 yrs younger than my age suggests”. The requirement of youthfulness, as regards both appearance and (sexual) performance, seems to be governed by the myth that young is always better and more valuable than the slightly older. Women do not touch upon questions of *sexuality* or *erotics* in their self-narratives. Men’s approach is practical. In their narratives they refer to themselves as being “sexually adventurous” or “of pretty high performance”. Also the fact that someone was “totally std-free (sexually transmitted disease) and intend[ed] to keep it that way” or that the partner “should be scrupulous about hygiene” emphasize the practical focus of sexuality as something we do, as performance. In one narrative only, attributes “creative and passionate” are mentioned, but they can also be associated with other walks of life than sexuality.

The advertiser’s expectations from the eventual partner and the prospects of the future relationship are mentioned in many self-narratives, although their actual place is in the narratives of the Ideal Match. In women’s answers variation is great. Two women mention their independence, and one of them refer to finding a companion as one of her projects in life: “I know what I want in life, and this includes meeting an ex-South African man with similar values”. The other one, despite a reference to integrity, handed

over the initiative to the man: “Love my own company but am incomplete without a soulmate...I know he is out there somewhere so come get me”. The most striking difference between women’s and men’s comments is that while women tend to hold on to their integrity, men seem to be more open and express themselves more openly in reciprocal terms: “I’d like a girl who, in return for loyalty, offers it in return. I would love to meet a girl who wants to be deeply loved and respected, who is not critical in return, but who respects those qualities”.

Another example of this is the following comment that seeks for reciprocity in strong terms. However, it is difficult to say whether it is a question of service-mindedness merely in sexual terms: “I am here to be the one you are looking for what ever it takes I will try to please you”. One of the most honest, humorous and sympathetic comments on reciprocity is the following: “no idea why anybody would want to know me”.

In the category *other* I have placed for example mentions of names and star signs. Mentioning one’s star sign is a powerful indicator in two ways: if a person is a believer in horoscopes the star sign communicates about the prospects of the relationship. If not, mentioning the star sign may label the advertiser in a negative way. Only one woman mentions her star sign in the material. Both men and women have invitations to make contact by for example sending a mail.

5 Gender difference as represented in self-narratives

A personal ad is a specific text type with the purpose to attract another person’s interest among hundreds of rivals. A site like datinginireland.com is a marketplace relying heavily on gender difference when offering the advertisers a virtual window to display themselves. So, how is gender represented on this marketplace?

It seems that on the whole, women’s and men’s narratives have a great deal in common. However, how the sexes construct their selves as desirable objects has differences that are based on the culturally constructed conceptions of gender. The most important differences emerge in the areas of social relations, sexuality, and what could be called

agency. That women tend to see themselves in relation to other people, their friends and their families, supports the traditional view of women as inclined to depend their identities on other people. However, the assumption that women are less individualistic than men in their conceptualization of their selves is on the other hand called into question, because although women take into account their social relations as constituents of their selves, they simultaneously emphasize their integrity within the community of friends and family members and particularly in their relation with the prospective partner. Men tell more about themselves in a straight-forward way and refer very seldom to other social relations besides the potential ideal match. In this sense, their lives are constituted as more restricted than those of women.

Only men refer to their appearances, and only men mention sexuality in their narratives. Most likely, this has to do with the gaze and the pertaining taboos that restrict the ways in which femininity can be displayed publicly. Firstly, women are not supposed to trade themselves as objects of desire, and by submitting a profile onto a dating site they already run the risk of exceeding the limits of normative, approvable femininity. Secondly, by avoiding a deliberate submission to the gaze when refusing to make references to sexuality, women avoid the risk of trespassing forbidden territory. The marketplace for the self is governed by gender-based restrictions, and it seems that for women, the space of self-definition is more limited than for men; in this field femininity allows for less variation than masculinity.

The fact that women construct themselves as active agents with a variety of interests and as involved in different activities suggests that femininity is no longer distinctively the site of passivity and immanence. By stating that they can do things and actually engage themselves in different kind of activities the advertisers create a representation of themselves as active and successful. Women's agency most obviously also relates to the question of integrity in a relationship: A person with interests and hobbies will engage herself in a balanced relationship only with someone who is prepared to respect the woman's integrity.

Conclusively, it seems that on datingireland.com, gender difference is still going strong. The overall impression is that although both men and women display themselves as objects of desire on this marketplace, the mechanisms work differently for the sexes: men trade themselves directly and utilize different walks of life, while women use more indirect ways and put themselves on display in fewer categories.

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