

Individual freedoms, new lifestyle models: Partnerships have become more demanding and complex. Freedom also means actively shaping the relationship.



WOULD YOU LIKE TO GO OUT WITH ME?

TEXT: SABINE FISCHER

PHOTO: ADRIANA-VELASQUEZ / UNSPLASH

A swipe to the right, a swipe to the left – never before have there been so many options for finding a partner, at least if you believe the promises of dating apps. But how free is our choice of partner really? And what about deciding whether and when to have children? Julia Leesch and Nicole Hiekel at the Max Planck Institute for Demographic Research are studying exactly these questions.

It's an impossible love: when Rose and Jack first meet on the deck of the Titanic, the audience clearly knows what separates them. She is an educated young woman from the American upper class. He is a penniless gambler and artist from somewhere in the American Midwest. Commonalities? None. Despite these differences, a love that transcends class barriers is born between the two in James Cameron's 1997 film classic – only to end in tragedy.

Limited freedom of choice

Literature and film history are rich with love stories that cross class boundaries and end tragically. In the novel *Wuthering Heights* by Victorian author Emily Brontë, for example, the wealthy Catherine's love for the stable boy Heathcliff leads to disaster. And in Friedrich Schiller's *Intrigue and Love*, the relationship between Ferdinand, a nobleman, and Louise, the daughter of a city musician, fails because of her bourgeois background. Would Rose and Jack have had little hope of a successful relationship, despite their great love? In that society – the Titanic sank in 1912 – it would indeed have been difficult for them: in the search for a relationship, people had little freedom of choice. Romantic relationships outside of one's socioeconomic class were hardly possible – as unlikely as Jack and Rose growing old together.

But what about today? Would they have a better chance of happiness together in today's society? Even today, who you enter into a relationship with is not a matter of chance: "There are clearly identifiable factors by which individuals form partnerships," says Julia Leesch, who studies patterns in partner choice at the Max Planck Institute for Demographic Research. A key insight is that we are not entirely free to choose in this regard: "We are dependent on who we meet in the first place. In addition, what matters are our own preferences and who ultimately responds to our interest. This significantly limits our freedom of choice," says Leesch.

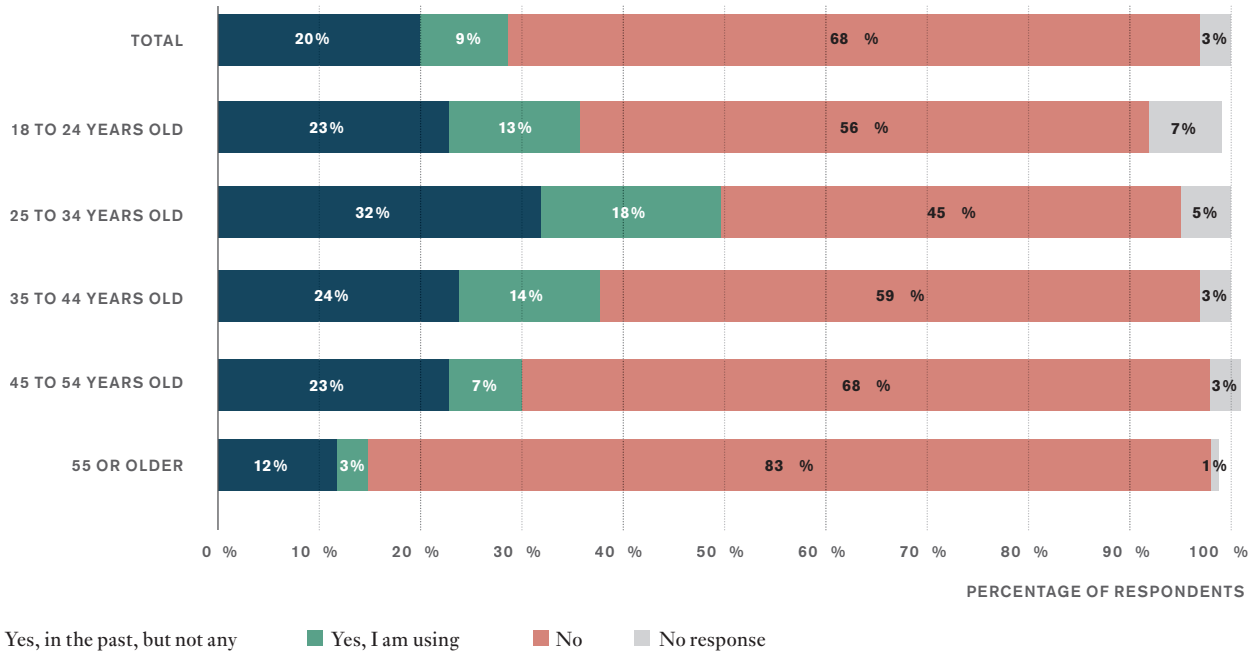
This is despite the fact that dating today seems to be freer and has fewer limitations than ever before. Thanks to dating platforms like Hinge, Tinder and others, potential partners pop up on smartphone screens by the thousands, while the next potential partner seems to be available 24/7. This seems to be something that we find appealing: according to a survey by the public opinion research institute YouGov, about half of 25- to 34-year-olds have used dating apps at least once. Even among 45- to 54-year-olds, the figure is still 30 percent. A study by the University of Vienna also shows that dating apps give most users the feeling that there are always many potential partners to choose from.

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JULIA LEESCH

However, Leesch explains, even when you are online, you are not free from the market situation, your personal preferences, and above all, whether such preferences are reciprocated. Virtual platforms expand the pool of potential partners, but not everyone can turn wishful thinking into reality. "Researchers have analyzed user behavior and found, for example, that as men get older, they prefer to message younger women. In reality, however, there are relatively few relationships with a large age difference between partners. A seemingly larger selection doesn't necessarily lead to success when it comes to choosing a partner," says Leesch. A large-scale study conducted by a team of researchers led by Tanya Horwitz, an American researcher, is studying which criteria play a particularly important role in this process. The team analyzed 199 studies and gained insight into the importance of certain factors in choosing a partner. Yayouk Willems, a scientific research assistant at the Max Planck Institute for Human Development, summarized the study's findings. These clearly show: whether we can imagine a relationship with another person is not necessarily determined by their charisma, humor, or beautiful eyes – as is the case in the relationship between Jack and Rose portrayed by James Cameron. The couples studied showed the greatest commonalities in relatively unromantic factors. At the top of the list are the other person's IQ, education level, and drinking and smoking habits.

"Apparently, personality traits such as whether someone is more introverted or extroverted are much less important," Willems explains. Although she was surprised at first, she now finds the results understandable: "It could be," says Willems, "that people pay much more



Source: YouGov

Partner search via databases: percentage of internet users using dating apps, by age group in 2024.

attention to how they spend time together in a relationship and what values the other person holds. Couples seem to be able to compensate for differences in character traits.”

The second key finding of the study also suggests that the love story of Jack and Rose would probably not have a happy ending in today’s world: the idea that opposites attract seems to be a myth when it comes to choosing a mate. In fact, the vast majority of couples studied showed a wide range of commonalities. “There were hardly any really fundamentally different couples,” says Willems. Especially when it comes to social status, which isn’t surprising: “People interact in their social environment and look for people who are like them.”

Education as a key factor

Julia Leesch has studied how education influences the choice of a partner. “Education is also an indicator of

things like income, values, or lifestyle and therefore encompasses more than just the question of academic degree. That makes this factor particularly interesting.” She analyzed Irish census data on about 100,000 young women between the ages of 25 and 34 who were in partnerships. It showed that birds of a feather flock together. In 2016, about 60 percent of the women Leesch analyzed had a partner with the same level of education – experts call this educational homogamy. Is this pure coincidence? “Probably not,” says Leesch. When researchers randomly paired individuals from the dataset into hypothetical couples, only 40 percent had the same level of education.

The trend toward educational homogamy can be seen in many European countries today. This is mainly due to the expansion of education, i.e., the increasing number of people with higher education degrees, says Julia Leesch. “It plays a big role in who is available as a partner. If many people have the same level of education, there will be many couples where both have achieved the →

same degree of education.” It is well known that similarity in levels of education plays a significant role in relationships. “Research shows that, in the past, marriages in which the wife had a higher level of education than the husband were more likely to end in divorce,” says Julia Leesch. “This may be a result of such a distribution not conforming to the gender norms of the time, which may have strained such relationships.” So, if Jack and Rose had both survived the shipwreck and gotten married, the likelihood of divorce would have been very high. At the very least, the movie couple would have faced numerous significant challenges. Education also has a significant impact on other life choices, such as whether and when to have children.

Not just a community property arrangement

Nicole Hiekel, who heads the Gender Inequalities and Fertility group at the Max Planck Institute for Demographic Research, is studying how partnership affects other life decisions. For example, education plays a significant role in the desire to have children: “Highly educated people generally want to have children later than those with less education, in part because most see higher education as incompatible with starting a family, and they enter the labor market later,” says Hiekel. Changing social conditions are also responsible for this. Especially for women, the meaning of partnership, children, and family has changed fundamentally. “In the past, women were often financially dependent on their husbands and could do little to change this due to societal conventions regarding gender roles.” The expansion of education and women’s strong participation in the labor market have made them more financially independent in today’s partnerships. Women bring more to the table today – and it is now more important for men that their partners contribute to the household income. In this respect, we see a convergence between the genders,” concludes Nicole Hiekel.

Increasing financial independence affects not only the choice of partner, but also the decision to end a relationship: for most people, a partnership is much more than a community property arrangement today. “The

importance of the relationship for personal development has become more significant,” observes Hiekel. This also changes the expectations for a successful relationship. Do I feel close to my partner? Do I feel valued? In particular, the desire for emotional intimacy has become much more important today. If this expectation is not met, the prospects for continuity in a relationship are worse than in the past.

SUMMARY

Our choice of partner is often perceived as free, yet it is more influenced by commonalities such as similar levels of education and lifestyles than by romantic notions.

Couples with higher education degrees have children later than those with lower educational qualifications.

Due to the expansion of education and the resulting financial independence of both partners, emotional intimacy in partnerships has gained importance, especially for women. Consequently, modern partnerships place higher demands on communication skills.

This shift in values is creating new freedom for singles: “Many people today feel more strongly that their personal identity has multiple dimensions. Partnership and parenthood are undoubtedly still part of it. However, society has opened up alternative spaces where people can achieve personal growth, for example, in hobbies or friendships,” Hiekel explains. Nevertheless, a serious and stable relationship remains a central life goal for most people: “For many, the idea of finding someone they are emotionally close to is still very important. And it also involves a form of personal growth that was not automatically granted to people in the past.”

This personal growth, in turn, leads to another form of freedom: relationship models are diversifying, being renegotiated and individually crafted – from polyamorous relationships, where partners maintain romantic

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NICOLE HIEKEL



Commonalities connect: education, lifestyle, and values, as well as the idea of a successful vacation, influence who comes together – and stays together.

relationships of equal value with multiple people, to same-sex and open models, where individuals allow each other to have sex with others outside the relationship. “This gives rise to great freedom, because the institutional framework is no longer as fixed, and partnerships are more rooted in negotiation processes,” says Hiekel. It leads to changes: “Studies show that same-sex relationships are generally organized more equitably, especially concerning the distribution of paid work and unpaid care work.” This suggests that the typical division of tasks between men and women in heterosexual relationships often does not aim to optimize outcomes for everyone – i.e., to maximize benefits. Instead, these partnerships still seem strongly influenced by traditional roles, according to Hiekel. “It might also be that less conventional lifestyles give people more space to define themselves,” the researcher elaborates. Similar observations are made with heterosexual couples who live together without being married. “The fact that this

form of relationship is not legally recognized leads, among other things, to these couples being less inclined to pool their incomes.”

At the same time, the newly gained flexibility also presents new challenges: “Negotiating a partnership beyond established norms and practices, whether concerning sexual monogamy, a gender-independent division of labor, or the delineation between joint and personal property, requires resources, above all communication skills. This is demanding, and not everyone is equipped with the same competencies,” says Nicole Hiekel. “Freedom also means that each individual takes on a great responsibility to sustainably shape their relationship.” And does so independently of the fact that relationship models and partnerships have become more demanding and complex in some respects today than in the times of Rose and Jack: even today, the love between the two would not be easy. ←