

Victorian mate choice

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Miller, G. F. (2001). Three Victorian questions about potential sexual partners. EDGE
<http://www.edge.org/documents/questions/q2001p.html#miller>

In response to the question: "What questions have disappeared, and why?"

Three Victorian questions about potential sexual partners:

- 'Are they from a good family?'
- 'What are their accomplishments?'
- 'Was their money and status acquired ethically?'

To our "Sex and the City" generation, these three questions sound shamefully reactionary and bourgeois. Yet they were not unique to 19th century England: they obsessed the families of eligible young men and women in every agricultural and industrial civilization. Only with our socially-atomized, late-capitalist society have these questions become tasteless, if not taboo. Worried parents ask them only in the privacy of their own consciences, in the sleepless nights before a son or daughter's ill-considered marriage.

The "good family" question always concerned genetic inheritance as much as financial inheritance. Since humans evolved in bands of closely-related kin, we probably evolved an intuitive appreciation of the genetics relevant to mate choice, taking into account the heritable strengths and weakness that we could observe in each potential mate's relatives, as well as their own qualities.

Recent findings in medical genetics and behavior genetics demonstrate the wisdom of taking a keen interest in such relatives: one can tell a lot about a young person's likely future personality, achievements, beliefs, parenting style, and mental and physical health by observing their parents, siblings, uncles, and aunts. Yet the current American anti-genetic ideology demands that we ignore such cues of genetic quality -- God forbid anyone should accuse us of eugenics.

Consider the possible reactions a woman might have to hearing that a potential husband was beaten as a child by parents who were alcoholic, aggressive religious fundamentalists. Twin and adoption studies show that alcoholism, aggressiveness, and religiosity are moderately heritable, so such a man is likely to become a rather unpleasant father. Yet our therapy culture says the woman should offer only non-judgmental sympathy to the man, ignoring the inner warning bells that may be going off about his family and thus his genes. Our culture alienates women and men from their own genetic intuitions, and thereby puts their children at risk.

The question "What are their accomplishments?" refers not to career success, but to the constellation of hobbies, interests, and skills that would have adorned most educated young people in previous centuries. Things like playing pianos, painting portraits, singing hymns, riding horses, and planning dinner parties. Such accomplishments have been lost through time pressure, squeezed out between the hyper-competitive domain of school and work, and the narcissistic domain of leisure and entertainment.

It is rare to find a young person who does anything in the evening that requires practice (beyond homework) -- anything that builds skills and self-esteem, anything that creates a satisfying,

productive "flow" state, anything that can be displayed with pride in public. Parental hot-housing of young children is not the same: after the child's resentment builds throughout the French and ballet lessons, the budding skills are abandoned with the rebelliousness of puberty -- or continued perfunctorily only because they will look good on college applications.

The result is a cohort of young people whose only possible source of self-esteem is the school/work domain -- an increasingly winner-take-all contest where only the brightest and most motivated feel good about themselves. (And we wonder why suicidal depression among adolescents has doubled in one generation.) This situation is convenient for corporate recruiting because it channels human instincts for mating effort and status-seeking into a narrow range of economically productive activities. Yet it denies young people the breadth of skills that would make their own lives more fulfilling, and their potential lovers more impressed. Their identities grow one-dimensionally, shooting straight up towards career success without branching out into the variegated skill sets which could soak up the sunlight of respect from flirtations and friendships, and which could offer shelter, and alternative directions for growth, should the central shoot snap.

The question "Was their money and status acquired ethically?" sounds even quainter, but its loss is even more insidious. As the maximization of share-holder value guides every decision in contemporary business, individual moral principles are exiled to the leisure realm. They can be manifest only in the Greenpeace membership that reduces one's guilt about working for Starbucks or Nike.

Just as hip young consumers justify the purchase of immorally manufactured products as "ironic" consumption, they justify working for immoral businesses as "ironic" careerism. They aren't "really" working in an ad agency that handles the Phillip Morris account for China; they're just interning for the experience, or they're really an aspiring screen-writer or dot-com entrepreneur. The explosion in part-time, underpaid, high-turnover service industry jobs encourages this sort of amoral, ironic detachment on the lower rungs of the corporate ladder. At the upper end, most executives assume that shareholder value trumps their own personal values. And in the middle, managers dare not raise issues of corporate ethics for fear of being down-sized.

The dating scene is complicit in this corporate amorality. The idea that Carrie Bradshaw or Ally McBeal would stop seeing a guy just because he works for an unethical company doesn't even compute. The only relevant morality is personal -- whether he is kind, honest, and faithful to them. Who cares about the effect his company is having on the Phillipino girls working for his sub-contractors? "Sisterhood" is so Seventies. Conversely, men who question the ethics of a woman's career choice risk sounding sexist: how dare he ask her to handicap herself with a conscience, when her gender is already enough of a handicap in getting past the glass ceiling?

In place of these biologically, psychologically, ethically grounded questions, marketers encourage young people to ask questions only about each other's branded identities. Armani or J. Crew clothes? Stanford or U.C.L.A. degree? Democrat or Republican? Prefer "The Matrix" or "You've Got Mail"? Eminem or Sophie B. Hawkins? Been to Ibiza or Cool Britannia? Taking Prozac or Wellbutrin for the depression? Any taste that doesn't lead to a purchase, any skill that doesn't require equipment, any belief that doesn't lead to supporting a non-profit group with an aggressive P.R. department, doesn't make any sense in current mating market.

We are supposed to consume our way into an identity, and into our most intimate relationships. But after all the shopping is done, we have to face, for the rest of our lives, the answers that the

Victorians sought: what genetic propensities, fulfilling skills, and moral values do our sexual partners have? We might not have bothered to ask, but our children will find out sooner or later.