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## Overcharged emotion : internet dating, negotiation and emotion

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Teraźniejszość - Człowiek - Edukacja : kwartalnik myśli społeczno-pedagogicznej nr 4 (56), 125-133

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2011

Artykuł został opracowany do udostępnienia w internecie przez Muzeum Historii Polski w ramach prac podejmowanych na rzecz zapewnienia otwartego, powszechnego i trwałego dostępu do polskiego dorobku naukowego i kulturalnego. Artykuł jest umieszczony w kolekcji cyfrowej [bazhum.muzhp.pl](http://bazhum.muzhp.pl), gromadzącej zawartość polskich czasopism humanistycznych i społecznych.

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## **Overcharged emotion: internet dating, negotiation and emotion**

My ambition of this paper is to present some findings and ideas from my study of internet dating activities and its related formative emotions. In sum, I have tried to understand the negotiated actor-defined realities of internet dating through the lens of emotions. In focus of this paper is one specific Swedish internet dating site.

### **Research method**

Sixty-eight participants of the internet dating site have been interviewed by e-mail. Fifteen of these interviews were followed up by a second one. The material has been coded with a basic grounded theory approach, word-by-word, segment-by-segment and so forth (see: Strauss 1987). Emotions, or narrated emotional experiences, have been discovered through indicators in the material (Starrin, Larsson, Dahlgren, Styrborn 1991).

The broader situation for action has been reflected upon by employing a situational analysis of the material (Clarke 2005). Situational analysis means to map out, in example economic influences, symbolic manifestations, individual and collective actors, non-human and human actors, temporal aspects and so forth. Further mapping involves laying out salient or implicated positions taken and not taken by the actors in the material in respect to some emerging category. Also, situational analysis involves mapping out social worlds and social arenas. In short, social worlds are collective

commitments to certain forms of primary activities, and social arenas are where the social worlds gather and compete for similar resources (Strauss 1978).

### **How can internet dating be understood?**

The people I have interviewed are committed to internet dating, or the internet dating world on the dating arena. The idea is that we belong to various social worlds in course of going on with our life (Luckmann 1978; Strauss 1982). Internet dating may be one of these social worlds; it is understood as a collectively shared commitment to certain forms of activities (see: Strauss 1978; 1982; 1984; 1993; Becker 1982; Clarke 1991; 2005). We are as social beings part of social worlds and we do things together in similar ways and in certain associated sites for action. We also use associated technologies for carrying out the activities of the social world (Strauss 1978). The internet dating site may then be seen as a particular site for action and as containing various technologies for carrying out internet dating activities.

### **The orientation of the internet dating world through this internet dating site**

Internet dating activities are structured by the internet dating site and the “search for a future someone” is staged on the website and in the broader situation. On the internet dating site, people have a common orientation towards dating. This makes the activities more centered on figuring out if the other person is one’s future partner. The structure of the internet dating and the shared activity of doing dating, create a sense of certainty of what the situation is all about. Doing dating in other social worlds may be a more uncertain business, since it is not necessarily the primary activity of those worlds. Also, by participating in the common activities of the internet dating, a specific version of doing dating and internet dating is promoted and learned by the participants.

### **Emotions on the internet dating site**

In my thesis I understood emotions from a neo-Meadian viewpoint of the social act. From that view emotions are based on the disruption of one’s tendency to act

(Mead 1982, p. 43). A problematic situation has arisen. Emotions are thus, as felt experiences, understood as being based on experiencing oneself from the perspective of the other (Engdahl 2005). Through this process one implicitly or explicitly performs similar actions as the other person. One's initial tendency to act upon has been disrupted in the light of a new perspective. One then comes to corporeally evaluate this in terms of a felt experience. The role of emotions, as based on the social act, is in the present to direct oneself towards the completion of the disrupted act in the future (see: von Wright 2000, p. 98). Emotion is then an early predisposition to the completion of an act in the future. But this emotional base for action only becomes reflected upon when one's interchanges with other and the outer world is disrupted (Engdahl 2005). I have tried to interpret this line of thought for the situation of the participants of internet dating.

In sum, for those doing internet dating, hope is initially experienced in the present. As the current life situation is met with resistance. It could be seen as a problematic situation. Hope, as an emotion, orients the persons' towards completion of the act in the future. In the future lies happiness, thus the intentional character of experiencing hope is directed towards yet another emotional state in the future. This future emotional state is clustered around the discourse of a heterosexual and monogamous relationship based on the idea of romantic love. The shared experience of hope produces the so called imaginary life of the internet daters, which the internet dating company makes revenue on (see: Arvidsson 2006). The interest of the internet dating company is to have people in a state of hope, because the company makes profit of this emotional state. The internet dating company is both dependent on and interested in the hope of those doing internet dating. Since hope re-generates the internet dating world carried out on the internet dating site. Hope is the predisposition to act in the internet dating site.

### **Immaterial labor, emotional labor and the emotional order**

On the internet dating site the participants are doing immaterial labor by imagining possible social relationships with others (Arvidsson 2006). The participants in internet dating are also doing something similar to emotional labor (Hochschild 1983, p. 7). But this emotional labor is not necessarily made in accordance with a company standard, such as for example feeling rules set by the internet dating company (compare: Hochschild 1983, p. 8). These people are not employed by the internet company. They are both producers and consumers. They consume what they produce together on the internet dating site mainly through their interaction with the site and with other members.

I argue that social worlds are associated with emotional orders (see: Strauss 1993). Emotional orders are the emotional side of social worlds. In the case of internet dating, emotional orders are constituted by the participants' partaking in internet dating activities, and on the conditions for actions set by the situation in which the participants find themselves. People doing things together are thus confronted with a situation where their actions are conditioned. The emotional order is about the control of these conditions, in other words how one is conditioned to be doing certain things together with others. By this conditioning is the basis for certain emotions and subsequent actions brought forward.

The participants' emotions are used by the internet dating company but those doing internet dating is negotiating the dominating emotional order that is reproduced by the discourses on the internet dating site. Internet dating and its activities are possible by being directed towards the future. By doing internet dating activities are imagination and emotion brought into the situation of action. The essential social process that re-generates the internet dating world on this particular internet site is "to be in hope for a future someone or something". The future someone is a partner and something is a heterosexual and monogamous relationship and this is associated with the idea of happiness in romantic love.

*Excitement, buzzes, butterflies in your belly, desire, happiness, yes-no-maybe, hope... This is where it starts. Hopeful meetings in a world full of emotions. There are thousands and thousands of singles here online – eager to find acquaintances, discuss whatever is important or unimportant to them and find a date. If you take the opportunity, there's a good chance that the adventure begins right here, right now* (Retrieved from the internet dating site, 2010.04.12).

This quote is taken from the front page of the internet dating site. The quote is part of the version of the emotional order proposed by the internet dating company. The conditional basis for action is then set by (offering) action possibilities by a narrative adjusted to the presumptive participants of internet dating site. One is not necessarily to be feeling the prescribed emotions in the narrative but to acknowledge the dominating emotional order. One is also to act upon the narrative as a way of overcoming one's current life situation. This situation may then be seen as a problematic one.

Furthermore, on the frontpage of the internet dating site is a relatively large picture situated. In this picture is a woman focused on. She is intensely looking at a man in the corner of the picture and whose face is blurred. In observing this picture one can think of it as being based on what has been termed the "male gaze" (Mulvey 1975). One reading of the picture suggests that the viewer is intended to be a heterosexual man. From the perspective of the indented viewer the woman, her attention and emotions is to be desired. The picture is also about the "end" of internet dating, where one enter into another arena and do things with the person you "found". "The search is

over” or rather the internet dating activities are over. In other words, the picture is of a possible imaginable future, it has an inbuilt emotional expectancy.

The internet dating site is part in setting the conditions for actions, this makes it hard to do other activities and have other ambitions than the one set by the internet dating site. Differences exist in the internet dating world, but to be genuinely and strongly committed to internet dating activities one needs to be in a state of hope. To be doing other activities leads to lesser degree of commitment.

### **Turning and tuning emotions: the processual negotiation of the emotional order**

The role of the internet dating company is to turn attention to and tune conditions for specific forms of emotions to appear. The internet dating company is thus part in the negotiation of the emotional order of the internet dating world. I suggest that the role of the internet dating company is to initially “fit” their version of the emotional order to the anticipated emotional experiences of the internet daters, which is being in a state of hope. In other words, they come to be attuning the internet dating site to the initial experiences of the internet daters. This is done in order to reproduce hope and orient people towards the ideal of heterosexual and monogamous relationships. The internet dating company has an interest in keeping the emotional order of the internet dating site static, as hope is to be constantly present and reproduce the valuable internet dating activities. The internet dating company commercializes the emotion of hope and the search for happiness in a heterosexual and monogamous relationship. This endeavor is materialized in the social action that the internet dating site makes possible and allows. The emotional order of the internet dating world is both produced and reproduced by the discourses on the internet dating site as well as by the participants themselves as they are involved in internet dating activities. In that respect, there is a process of regulating emotions involved in emotional orders. The emotional order thus comes to be exemplified by the representatives on this particular internet dating site.

As the participants come to be socialized into the world of internet dating, they learn to regulate their hope. In example they accept events as they unfold, be relaxed and stay focused on the present. The participants come to diverge from the dominating emotional order and are both having “too much hope” (in example despair) and “too little hope” (in example disappointment). Both despair and disappointment are given rise to by problematic situation: the idea of the future is not met. The commitment to the internet dating world is based on hope. But being “too committed” to the internet dating world is then the same as having “too much hope” as well as “too little hope” is

being “less committed”. The participants need to feel the right amount of hope in order to be able to conform to the dominating emotional order of the internet dating world. The consequence of going into too much or too little hope is to become loosely bound to the internet dating world and being in a state of a “relaxed” or perhaps, in Georg Simmel’s (1990) terms, a blasé attitude as something were one do not engage in value differences in the mode of rationalization and formalization of human life. Internet dating can be understood in these terms, were the activities through the internet dating site come to be about weighting, calculating, numerical determination, precision, punctuality and stability (Simmel 1990). In terms of overstimulation, the blasé attitude is an embodied attitude of indifference of what is going on (Simmel 1990, pp. 256–257).

All in all, participants with a relaxed attitude are loosely committed to internet dating, because internet dating is about the future and that future is hopeful but contingent; it is encouraging but also risky – it is a future to which one should hold on lightly in order not to be disappointed. They are in a position between hope and hopelessness. This is then a negotiation of the commitment to the dominating future-oriented emotional order.

The quote below is an example of a person describing her learning process. In other words, her process of coming into control and regulate her hope and thus commitment to internet dating and the search for a future someone.

*I used to get that tingly feeling all the time in the beginning. I’d get my hopes up quickly, thinking I’d found my prince after just a few letters exchanged. But I learned pretty soon that it’s often false hopes and that you shouldn’t tell the other person everything about yourself immediately, cause all of a sudden the he stops answering your letters. It doesn’t happen all the time, but it happens. So I’m afraid of hoping too much before getting to know the other person. Today I get belly butterflies, but not instantly. After writing quite a lot and really getting to know the person, the sensation that it could actually lead somewhere makes it happen (Woman, 20 years old).*

Part of the commercialization of emotions is the crystallization of the emotional order by the internet dating company, where they try to fit the initial emotional experiences of the entering internet daters. By this the company is producing a circle of actions, where dating continues as long as there is hope. Money is created through this circle of hopeful actions. The company wants to reproduce these actions and since the company do not want to let go of the participants. There is thus a struggle between the fixating tendencies of the internet dating company and the experiences of the internet daters. Some people tend to creatively find ways around paying to an internet dating company in order to get access to the communication technologies of the internet dating site. They find their own ways of communicating by presenting hidden messages on their profiles. But they are still part of the internet dating site as they are producing content. They become an imaginable future someone.

## Internet dating: stability, control and reproduction

The participants strive for a stable life situation in accordance with the norms of monogamous heterosexuality and romantic love. Perhaps the expectations are set too high, which then may cause a blasé attitude. When the normatively informed hopes are not met, the participants may feel disappointed and loose hope. The world of internet dating, at least the one under study, is oriented towards searching for a partner as its primary activity. People are evaluated from the standards suggested by monogamous heterosexuality set by the conditions for action on the internet dating site. An array of emotions is thus invested in the other, as the means of fulfilling an imagined future. But people tend to come and go. The social relationships of the internet dating world thus has a temporary character and hold people together until further notice (Bauman 2003).

*(...) Internet dating can also be very trying and take a lot of time. I only answer letters from people that I feel a genuine solid interest in – it takes too much time writing letters of nonsense to people that don't even fit my profile. Also it's very frustrating when "talking" to a guy for while, building up some sort of friendship where both have shared things about life and personal stuff etc, then actually meeting him and all of a sudden he's just not interesting anymore. And the other way around. All of a sudden this "friend" has vanished. It's without a doubt hard to open up time and time again, sharing your qualities. Eventually you talk less... (Woman, 40 years old).*

This quote is similar to the previous one. It is an example of how people come and go and the fragility in social relationships made on the internet dating site. This since the internet dating is based on the idea of evaluating the other as a potential partner and nothing else. It is as well about how you sort of slip into the so called "relaxed" attitude.

The search is about creating certainty in the future, while the search itself and the participants' situation are often seen as uncertain and ambivalent. The search is oriented towards the social relationship with a future someone and many seem to expect that this relationship will mean happiness, certainty and a new plan for the future. One may then see internet dating as a space in-between, where the intentional transformation of one's identity seems to become possible. The social activities involved in doing internet dating are, thus, intentional and temporary. They are intentional since there is a goal in the search for a future someone and temporary since they are constructed as a way to overcome one's current life situation and are thus future oriented. Furthermore, as these activities appear as temporary and intentional, the ambition for each individual is always to make internet dating activities unnecessary and ultimately take part in some other activities. The social world of internet dating, based on a site for



action that is temporary, intentional and transformative, in fact strives for its own destruction (from the viewpoint of the individual participant). But internet dating as such is upheld by the continuous activities of doing internet dating, as well as by the technologies and discourses of the internet dating site. The collective action is destructive; the social world of internet dating exists because people need it as a stepping stone. The internet dating companies, however, of course have an interest in the continuation of internet dating activities.

## Conclusions

The essential social process involved in internet dating is searching for a future someone/something. This process is given strength by the future- and action-oriented emotion of hope: the hope of happiness. The future is represented in imagination by talk about sought for emotions. The internet daters want to end their commitment to internet dating, while the internet dating company, for economic reasons, wants them to continue with the activity. The internet daters learn to regulate their spontaneous emotions; they learn not to show “too much” future-oriented emotions. Instead a “relaxed” attitude, based on the present, is encouraged among participants. The act of imagining and searching for a future someone/something is formalized and organized by means of internet dating sites. Emotions are thus being commercialized in the interest of the internet dating company.

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