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Random utility maximiser seeks similar: An economic analysis of commitment level in personal relationships

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Abstract

This paper presents the first attempts by economists to estimate a random utility maximisation model for the choice of desired involvement level in heterosexual relationships. A sample of newspaper 'personal' advertisements is used to estimate a multinomial logit. Age is found to reduce the net probability of seeking a casual relationship. A number of variables are found to be significant determinants of declared entry level. © 2000 Elsevier Science B.V. All rights reserved.

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“The sentiment of love is, in itself, agreeable to the person who feels it. It soothes and composes the breast, seems to favour the vital motions, and to promote the healthful state of the human constitution; and it is rendered still more delightful by the consciousness of the gratitude and satisfaction which it must excite in him who is the object of it. Their mutual regard renders them happy in one another, and sympathy with this mutual regard, makes them agreeable to every other person.”

[Adam Smith – *Theory of Moral Sentiments*, 1759]

1. Introduction

Economists inspired by Becker (1973, 1974) have (see Grossbard-Shechtman, 1995; Bergstrom, 1996) investigated family formation and related topics such as extramarital affairs (Fair, 1978). However there has not been explicit consideration of the process of partner selection with the exception of the early work of May (1954) and the illuminating work of Lemennicier (1988) who also gives some descriptive statistics on personal advertisements. The problem of matching relationship partners, at the aggregate level, has been modelled mathematically in the important work of Bergstrom and Bagnoli (1993) and Burdett and Coles (1997) and the micro matching problem was earlier studied by Gale and Shapley (1962). The focus of Burdett and Coles is on equilibrium in the aggregate market. The degree of reduction from the salient characteristics of the real world is strong, as the model is basically a straightforward analogue of the labour market where employers and workers pair according to productivity. A single real number index ‘pizazz’ is used to represent the attributes being offered. Individuals meet at periodic intervals to observe each other’s ‘pizazz’ with a view to either marrying or not.

From our perspective, the principal shortcoming in the Burdett and Coles world is the neglect of the multidimensionality of the implicit contracts formed by couples who pair with a view to marriage. In this area, it is not always easy to separate the search process from the end state. Economists have ignored the choice of ‘entry level’ to the process being signalled by a partner seeker, for example those using personal ads. in newspapers, offer such things as ‘friendship possibly leading to relationship’, or ‘seeks soul-mate’, or ‘daffodil seeks vase’, or ‘young female seeks solvent older male’.² Lemennicier (1988), using French advertisements, looks at requests for characteristics such as beauty, sense of humour, affection, height and weight

² The phrases cited have all been seen, by the authors, in personal advertisements, although not necessarily in the sample used here.

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