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MORALITY, MEANING, AND HAPPINESS WITHOUT THE CRUTCH OF RELIGION

DATING MATING SEX AND REPRODUCTION

Dating Tips: Decoy and Anchor

POSTED BY LIVING LIFE WITHOUT A NET · JULY 23, 2010 · 4 COMMENTS

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Today I'm going to go straight to dating advice, but it's going to be based on two principles of human irrationality. I spend so much time talking about how bad irrationality is, it seems like a good idea to show you a couple of ways it can work to your advantage. First, I need to explain two psychological mechanisms we all employ subconsciously: automatic comparison of like features, and anchoring.

Let's suppose you want to buy a house. The real estate agent takes you to three houses with your basic specifications. The first is a contemporary style while the second and third are both colonial.* All three houses are approximately the same price with one notable exception. One of the two colonial houses has a damaged roof, and the owner has knocked several thousand dollars off the price to allow for repairs. Which one does the real estate agent want you to buy? The colonial with the good roof. Why? Because you are hard-wired by evolution to automatically gravitate towards things which you can easily compare. It's difficult to compare the relative value and attractiveness of the colonial and contemporary houses since they are so different. On the other hand, it's easy to see that one colonial is better than the other. Without consciously thinking about it, you are likely to be emotionally drawn to the better colonial. This is a technique known as *the decoy*.

Whenever we want to influence someone's choice to our advantage, we need to be aware of the innate desire to compare similar things, and their tendency to be drawn to the better of two comparable things, even if there is an equally (or more) valuable thing that is hard to compare. The effect is not subtle, either. In an experiment with marketing students at MIT, subjects were given the choice of three subscription options for a magazine:

1. Internet only: \$59/year
2. Print Only: \$125/year
3. Print and Internet: \$125/year

It looks like a misprint, right? Why isn't the Print and Internet more than the Print Only? Because the goal is to get people to buy the Print and Internet option. When we are given this choice, we tend to gloss over the comparison between internet and print. They're too different. However, we can easily see that Internet plus Print is a better bargain than Print Only. In fact, from one point of view, the Internet is free! When they were offered this choice, the selections went like this:

1. Internet Only: 16
2. Print Only: 0
3. Internet and Print: 84

At this point, you might be thinking that this is a no-brainer. Nobody would buy the second one because it's clearly less of a value than the third, but maybe the students were just working off the desire to have both options. The researchers thought about that, so they conducted the same experiment with only these two choices:

1. Internet: \$59
2. Print and Internet: \$125

When given this choice, the results looked like this:

1. Internet: 68
2. Print and Internet: 32

Folks, that's not a small advantage. That's a swing of over half the participants! Fifty two students were influenced to buy the more expensive option simply because it was the better option of two comparable options. Their choice had little to do with whether or not they really needed a print subscription.

So how does this affect dating? In a similar study, the researcher offered students the choice of three people to hypothetically go on a date with. But there was a trick. There were really only two options. We'll call them Adam and Bob. Both men had been rated as equally attractive by a large group of female students. But the researchers had doctored the photos, making a version of each that was less symmetrical, had acne scars, and slightly offset eyes. In other words, a less desirable version of the same person. They conducted their study like this:

Group A: Chose between Adam, Negative Adam, and Bob

Group B: Chose between Adam, Bob, and Negative Bob

You might be shocked at the results. Whichever man had his less attractive Doppelgänger in the group was chosen *seventy five percent of the time!* Let that sink in for a minute. All things being equal, just looking better than someone who looks similar to you is a *huge advantage*. How do you make this work for you in practical terms? Find someone who looks similar to you but is less attractive. Take them with you when you're on the prowl. Better yet, compose a group of three, where the third person is significantly different than you and your lesser Doppelgänger. (And whatever you do, don't you dare tell anyone what you're doing.)

Simple, isn't it? (Girls, you have more options than guys in this. For one thing, you can dye your hair the same color as one of your less attractive friends. Guys can't really get away with that.) If you want to be less sneaky about it, make a deal with your equally attractive friend. One night is her night and one is yours. Dress down and let her dress up, then reverse it the next time you go out. (Only do this with an equally attractive friend. Again, never, ever, ever tell your less attractive friends how this works.)

Ok. Now to *anchoring*. This is a term used in the pickup artist community, but that's not what I'm talking about. In real psychology, anchoring is the process in which our brains "lock on" to our first impression of the value of something. Here's an example. When black pearls first hit the jewelry market, they were intentionally displayed next to the most valuable items in the store. They were priced exorbitantly, and jewelers made a big to-do about special procedures for showing them to prospective customers. Pretty soon, everybody's wife had to have a strand. The upshot is that black pearls have no more real value than regular pearls. That is, they're no harder to produce. But the intentional decision by the first "Black Pearl Tycoon" to price them at the top end of the market stuck, and now there's a very wealthy guy who bought his own island off the profits.

This is probably not surprising to you. We understand the power of first impressions. What is more important, however, is just how strongly our anchors hold, and how much they affect our decisions. Do you remember the famous "whitewash scene" from Tom Sawyer? Poor Tom had been given the tedious task of whitewashing Aunt Polly's fence. But instead of toiling away and wasting his day, he played an anchoring trick on his nemesis, Ben. Acting as if whitewashing a fence was the thing he wanted most to be doing, he nonchalantly tossed aside an invitation to go swimming. Surveying his work like Leonardo di ser Piero da Vinci admiring the Mona Lisa, he declined Ben's first offer to help. When he offered again, Tom said, "Ben, I'd like to, honest injun; but Aunt Polly – well, Jim wanted to do it, but she wouldn't let him; Sid wanted to do it, and she wouldn't let Sid. Now, don't you see how I' fixed? If you was to tackle this fence and anything was to happen to it –" By the end of the afternoon, all of Tom's playmates were *paying him* for the privilege of whitewashing the fence.

This is a great story to tell, but does it work in real life? It turns out that it does. In an amusing experiment, Dan Ariely, the James B. Duke Professor of Psychology and Behavioral Economics at Duke University, read a passage of poetry to two groups of students. (In describing this experiment, he went to great pains to mention how badly he reads poetry.) After the reading, he offered one group the opportunity to bid on seats for one of three readings later that evening. To the other, he offered the opportunity to get paid to come to a reading. The three sessions were marked short, medium, and long in duration.

You'll never guess what happened. (Or maybe you will. If so, good on you!) In the auction group, students offered *more money* to attend the *longer readings*. In the paid group, students demanded more money for enduring the longer sessions.

In presenting the reading as a *good and pleasurable thing*, Ariely had anchored it in the minds of the students, and their actions remained consistent with that anchor. Likewise when it was presented as an tedious and boring activity.

Anchors hold through changing circumstances, too. Statistics demonstrate that people's spending habits lag significantly behind their ability to spend. It's not how much we can afford — it's how much we're used to spending. Similarly, our estimation of a thing's value tends to remain largely set in stone. (Incidentally, this is why the introduction of faith-based thinking to children is so very dangerous. It *anchors* itself to them and becomes very difficult to shake later in life.)

So what's the lesson for dating? Simple: Make a list of everything others experience when they meet you, from your appearance to your mannerisms to your job to your living arrangements. Take the time to really think about each one and come up with at least one or two ways that they could be perceived as a positive. Anytime you meet someone new, *always* put the positive interpretation forward first. Self-deprecation has its moments, but those moments are *always* after the first impression. Anchor yourself to others as a person full of positive attributes. When you use self-deprecation later, it will be perceived as ironic humor, not truth.

Put anchoring and decoys together, and you have a powerful strategy for building instant and long lasting attraction. Make yourself the best of two similar options, and bring along a third dissimilar option. Sell everything about yourself as a positive. Are you flighty, unreliable, and prone to fits of indecision? Fine, but tell people that you are a dreamer, prone to flights of pleasurable fancy, and that you're enjoying life too much to settle down just yet. Having trouble landing the job you want? Tell people that work is important, but not nearly so important as having great friends and relationships. Been dumped three times in the last year? No, you haven't! You've been exploring options, and you're perfectly happy doing that until the real thing comes along. No settling for you!

Finally, there's a warning about anchoring. It works in reverse, too. I've discussed the tendency of the hookup culture to create inflated value in women before. Women see that lots of men want to hookup with them, and it creates the impression (often the first impression) that their value is quite high. The reality is that most of those men only want sex, not a relationship. Additionally, guys tend to lower their standards for casual sex. That is, they will have sex with a less attractive (valuable) woman if it's just short term. So for most women, the most attractive guys that hit on them are *not* willing to have a relationship with them.

But once this perception of value is anchored, it's stubborn. Perhaps all the spinster lit on the bookshelves today is a reflection of anchoring gone horribly wrong. In any case, women in particular should be very careful to examine their own value as objectively as possible, realizing that they might still be using an anchor from when they were 19.

If you want to watch anchoring in action, watch a few episodes of [Battle of the Bods](#) on Hulu. Observe how many of the *least attractive* women believe themselves to be the most attractive, and how resistant they are to taking last place, even when it stands to win them lots of money. That's not just ego. Many of these women really do believe themselves to be more attractive than they are, even when there is tons of evidence against it. That's how powerful anchoring is.

So, in a nutshell, here's what you do: Take a real, honest inventory of your value and attractiveness. Find a similar looking friend who is definitely a little less attractive than you. When you go out, have a pre-scripted and rehearsed sales pitch for all of your qualities, and spin the heck out of them.

Is it manipulative? Sure. But realize that many things in life don't have objective value. If you sell your traits as positive, and a potential suitor anchors to them as positives, then they *are positive*.

* Actually, if the agent is really smart, she'll show you the good colonial first, the contemporary second, and the bad colonial last. You'll understand why in a few minutes.

Discussion

4 thoughts on “Dating Tips: Decoy and Anchor”

1. OMG this is amazing stuff! Now I know why my best friend got all the guys!

POSTED BY **SHERRY WEIN** | JULY 25, 2010, 9:43 AM

2. *makes note to find a slightly less attractive twin*

POSTED BY **ALDONZA** | AUGUST 12, 2010, 2:56 PM

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