

The Hot, The Not, And The Doomed To Be Dumped

Contributed by Matt Katz
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I went to a science lecture this week for the first time in a decade, and if more lectures were this interesting -- or if they were held in a bar, like this one -- then I probably would have taken science more seriously. Or I would have at least shown up for class.

University of Pennsylvania psychologist Robert Kurzban held the lecture to discuss his not-yet-published study on "mate choice copying."

Previous mate choice copying research has focused on animals, like the sailfin molly fish, who were put in tanks so scientists could study two sets of male fish. On one side, the males were hanging out with females. On the other side, the males were alone, and presumably losers.

Once the barriers were lifted, the female fish were more likely to mate with the males who had been with females.

This is the "picture in the wallet" theory I spent many nights in college analyzing with friends instead of A) actually meeting women, or B) going to sleep to wake up in time for my morning science class.

The theory is that a woman is more attracted to a man who has already been liked (or loved) by an attractive woman. Therefore, guys, rip a picture from Victoria's Secret, put it in your wallet and you'll be set. Or you'll be a pervert. Either way, let Dr. Kurzban and me know what happens.

Kurzban's hypothesis was that people spend a lot of time at places --- like the bar where he was speaking --- looking for mates. But the kindness, intelligence and sense of humor traits women value in long-term partners are invisible in a bar setting, especially with the bad hip-hop booming from the speakers.

Therefore, if a man is seen hanging out with a hot woman, he must be OK because he passed the application process.

To test this, Kurzban showed 98 undergrads pictures from the dating site HotoNot.com. He asked them questions about how attracted they were to certain individuals if those individuals were dating a hot person in another picture.

He confirmed that regardless of gender, humans are more likely to want to have a relationship (and relations) with someone who has been with an attractive person.

"If you wanted to be chosen as a sex partner for someone, your best move is to date someone very attractive," Kurzban said. "I just report the data. I'm not making judgments."

Kurzban inspired me to ask my own scientific question: Once people are coupled up, do attractiveness levels affect whether the relationship lasts?

According to weddingbetting.com, where people look at pictures of couples and vote on whether they will stay together, the answer is yes.

Inevitably, because people are cynical haters, almost every couple is deemed destined for divorce. The creator of the site, Morgan Friedman, said this is "a sign of general frustration with everything."

But the likelihood of divorce decreases if the couple is, well, unattractive.

"In other words --- when people see a hot couple, they think that they will likely have an affair or be looking to trade-up," said Friedman.

(Full disclosure: After contacting Friedman for an interview, we realized we were friends in high school. And I remember us talking about girls then, too. The Internet is crazy.)

Clearly, some good looking couples are doomed regardless. "Jeremy & AB," according to the blurb next to their picture, have been together "off and on" for a year: "He has a son. But he got me a huge ring!"

They have an 83 percent chance of divorce.

But other couples were doomed just because they look great. They never had a fight and love each other to bits and blah-blah-blah, and yet voters clicked "divorced!"

To find out more, I posted a picture of my girlfriend (fiance) on the site. So far, we stand a 57 percent chance of getting divorced in 3.4 years, which is upsetting mostly because that means, at least theoretically, that we're not that attractive. If we were really hot, we'd be up to 90 percent.

Still, this being a scientific experiment, or cheap journalistic equivalent, we need more data. So go vote for us.

But guys, please don't send my girlfriend your phone number and pictures of your beautiful wife. Then, at least according to Kurzban, she really will dump me in 3.4 years.

This column appeared in the Courier-Post and Gannett newspapers nationwide.