

Internetdating. A Focus Group Investigation of Young Danes' and Frenchmen's Attitudes towards the Phenomenon

Pertly different social patterns of acting, norms, and values may account for the discrepancy in attitudes towards netdating between a group of young Danes and a group of young Frenchmen

By Annemarie Malchow-Møller

Internetdating... to meet one's boy- or girlfriend on the Internet... Just eight years ago it was inconceivable on the European continent. Today, it is becoming more and more part of everyday life. In Denmark at least. In France for example, it looks somewhat different. While in Denmark humorous articles in newspapers and magazines indicate that the youth both date on the Internet *and* talk about it¹, most of the French youth have not tried it, and some young people have not even heard of it. How can this be?

The purpose of this paper is to examine the reason for the discrepancy in attitudes towards netdating between a group of young Danes and a group of young Frenchmen, using two focus group debates - one with young Danes and one with young Frenchmen - as a point of departure. Some would argue that the reason for this discrepancy is to be found in the fact that the Internet is not as widespread in France as in Denmark, suggesting that the French youth will take on netdating as soon as the Internet becomes more familiar to them. This paper argues to the contrary, that the two groups base their opinions and attitudes on partly different social patterns of acting, norms, and values. Thus, the meaning of netdating for the two groups does not seem to be going to homogenize in the near future.

This paper claims to be written within the field of cultural studies. Thus, it may seem surprising that the concept of culture is conspicuous by its absence in the first part of the paper. However, referring to Sterne (1999) I endorse the position that cultural studies do not refer to being studies in and of culture but a genre of scholarship which, "is characterised by a set of shared intellectual strategies: These include attention to the political character of knowledge production, an orientation toward the analysis of context, a commitment to theory, and a theory of articulation" (Sterne 1999 p. 261). In this respect, the focal point of the paper will be on the ways in which the two groups of young people discuss netdating and thereby ascribe certain meanings to the phenomenon, and how the

context, i.e. their presuppositions concerning elements like the Internet, the intimate meeting, self-understanding etc., become fundamental to the production of meaning. In general, the theory used is social constructivist and interactionist. Hence, the concept of culture should be understood as a changeable frame that organizes, characterizes and makes production of meaning possible². It is not the purpose of this paper to discuss each theoretical concept critically; they have been selected because they were considered most appropriate to illuminate the material and what is at play when young Danes and Frenchmen discuss netdating.

What is netdating and speed-dating?

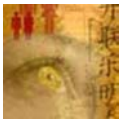
Several sites on the Internet offer people the opportunity for getting into contact with other people who are searching for boy- or girlfriends, friends, theatre companions, non-committal sex or whatever. The focal point here is people's search for boy- or girlfriends. Netdating is the primary scope of this paper, but speed-dating is partly included since the French group pointed it out as being far more common and interesting than netdating. Hence, the Danish group was asked to comment on it as well.

Netdating is a dating institution on the Internet where people draw up a sort of personal advertisement where they state their personal data, i.e. height, weight, level of education, work, interests etc., and describe themselves, what they are looking for etc. On some sites, it is also possible to put in a picture and a strip of recorded speech. Usually, you have to submit your own advertisement in order to search for others'. You search according to certain criteria, such as height, weight, age, pictures etc., and, if you find someone interesting, you can send him or her an e-mail to an address situated on the site and thus be independent of private e-mail addresses. From this point it is up to the persons involved whether they want to meet or not.

The biggest and most popular site in Denmark is dating.dk with 513,841 registered users (May 1st

¹ Recently (Nov. 15-21 2002) the paper *Weekend Avisen* brought an article on the subject and so did the in-house magazine of the Department of Political Science at the University of Aarhus (Dec. 2002).

² I here lean on the introductory definition of culture by Eva Illouz, 1997, without sharing her consume-analytical approach. *Consuming the Romantic Utopia*, University of California Press, 1997 p.3



20:20pm); any dual advertisements are not taken into account³. The second largest site is scor.dk with 'more than 100,000 users', and then you have some smaller sites and other contact services on multi-service sites like Yahoo, jubii and others.



In France it is not possible to point out *the* biggest dating site since more sites cover several if not all francophone countries. Equally, pure dating sites are rare. Often you have to go to multi-service sites like lycos, aol and others. Nevertheless, some fi-

gures may induce an idea of how widespread netdating is in France: For example love@lycos.fr advertises 800,005 users (May 1st 20:20pm) while meetic.fr advertises 1,551,224 users (May 1st 20:20pm). However, meetic covers Belgium, France, Italy, Germany, UK and Spain. While in Denmark you find one agency with approximately 500,000 users and several smaller ones, in France you find more but not many agencies with 800,000 odd users (like lycos) and the international meetic. Comparing these numbers with the population of the two countries, namely 5.3 million people in Denmark and 60.7 million in France, it is obvious that netdating is relatively far more widespread in Denmark than in France⁴.

When it comes to speed-dating, also called turbo-dating, we find the opposite pattern. On francophone sites you find several suppliers, primarily in the larger cities like Paris, Marseille, Lyon and Lille whereas I have not been able to find one single supplier on Danish sites. In speed-dating seven or eight women meet a corresponding number of men at a bar, café or restaurant somewhere in the city. They have a seven or eight minute talk with each member of the opposite sex to find out if that person is interesting or not. They are not allowed to speak about work, money or education. Afterwards, each person writes to the agency to say whom he or she found nice and would like to meet again. If two people write each other's names, the agency communicates their e-mail addresses so that they can continue on their own. What happens on the evening after the seven times seven minutes is up to the individuals involved.

MATERIAL

Why focus groups?

According to Berger and Luckmann (1996 [1966]), society consists of objective reality. That means that, through interaction with other individuals, what seems real to the individual (human subjectivity) is objectified

in systems of signs that make it possible for us to communicate our subjective experiences. Language is our most important system of signs, but also gestures, specific objects, symbolic patterns of action etc. act as systems of signs making communication of meaning possible. Over generations these objectified meanings are institutionalized and Man has thereby produced a society of objective reality (see also Berger and Luckmann 1996 pp.79sq.). When an individual grows up in such a society, he internalizes the forms of symbolic action and they take form as common-sense knowledge to him. We do not all share the exact same reality. According to Berger and Luckmann, we are part of several realities of which we share some with some and others with others. However, in order to understand each other in a certain situation, we need to have access to the same store of knowledge, or to the same reality. Outsiders without access to this store, or this reality, would understand the situation differently.

When a group of young French people and a group of young Danes understand netdating in two very distinct ways, it might be due to the fact that they do not share exactly the same reality and the same social norms. Therefore, an examination of their differing understandings of netdating should look closely at their internalized norms and patterns of action, i.e. at the premises on which they base their production of meaning.

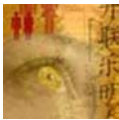
In this light, it seems appropriate to base the examination on a discussion of netdating in focus groups. These are especially "good at producing data that illuminates norms for group customs and interpretations" (Halkier 2002 p. 112, my translation). In these groups, the individual points of view are mostly left out contrarily to individual interviews. Instead the groups' "shared understanding of everyday life" is grasped (Gibbs 1997). Referring to Goffman, Halkier points out that "persons in interaction with each other try to sustain their self-narratives" and that "people seek to demonstrate normality opposite one another" (Halkier 2002 p. 94sq., my translation, see also Goffman 1986 [1974] chap. 13). Thus, in a focus group debate you get access to common understandings of phenomena: How does the group look on netdaters? Which meaning does it ascribe to the phenomenon? And to the common understanding of norms and values: How should you act and what should you say in order to be understood as normal?

The selection

When putting together the two focus groups, I purposely selected people who knew each other in advance. In this way the participants were prepared to say more and, most importantly, they had partly shared backgrounds; the participants move in the same everyday environment and may therefore be expected to have internalised larger parts of the same norms and patterns of action. Thus, they have a common normality which they all try to live up to and from which they all argue. In both cases, I asked a friend of mine to assemble a group of friends that I did not know in

³ 'Dual advertisements' covers single persons drawing up several advertisements as well as several persons drawing up one advertisement in common.

⁴ The numbers are per January 1st 2002 and found at Danmarks Statistik, www.dst.dk, and Institut National de Statistique et des Études Économiques, www.insee.fr.



advance and therefore was not an integrated part of. A few criteria were to be followed: the group had to be a mixture of men and women and a mixture of singles and non-singles. Such a mixed group would find common ground in their usual everyday interaction and not in a possible sectional interest like, for example, a group of single girls might be expected to do. (See Halkier 2002 p.32sq.). In this way, it was possible for me to closely examine the frames of the discussion based on common internalized norms, and not on a common interest.

In the end both groups came to consist of six people, four women and two men. All were in their twenties and all were fairly well educated with connections to the universities of Aarhus and Paris respectively. Whether they were netdaters or not did not matter in the selection. As a result, only one from the French group had (second hand) knowledge of netdating, while three from the Danish group had tried it. I do not consider this to bias the analysis, since the previously presented data on netdaters in the two countries shows that it can be hard to find a French netdater when you select a group at random. Furthermore, one has to remember that the focal point of the paper is the production of meaning around netdating, i.e. the reason why netdating is understood the way it is among young Danes and young Frenchmen. In this connection, it should not be ignored that the minimal use of netdating among the Frenchmen could be due to the status of the phenomenon.

The two groups of young people are not supposed to be representative of the entire youth of Denmark and France. They are, however, chosen because of their nationality; on the one hand, because the Internet has only recently become widespread in France compared to Denmark⁵; on the other hand, because my personal experience tells me that the French code for meeting new people, especially boy- or girlfriends, differs from the Danish. Therefore, I expect the two groups to have differing attitudes towards netdating and they probably base these attitudes on different social norms for dating, sociality on the Internet etc. By comparing them, the expected differences will make it clear which implicit frames the two groups act within.

ANALYSIS

Generally speaking, the analysis has three dimensions. Firstly, we have the status of netdating compared to other ways of meeting people. Who dates and why? Is it acceptable etc.? Secondly, netdating is an example of a mediated meeting, which leads to the question of the

influence of the media on the meeting, and thus on the understanding of netdating. Thirdly is the question of the use the individual makes of netdating in relation to his or her self-perception. How is netdating used to represent the self and promote reflexivity and what does this imply? To illuminate all three aspects, it is necessary to use several analytical tools. Common and fundamental to all of the theories used in this paper is the understanding of meaning as it is constituted through interaction. In this case it is constituted through interaction between the individuals in the groups, between the groups and society, and between the individuals and netdating as phenomenon.



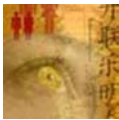
Placing netdating on the map of social reality

“Without context, words and actions have no meaning at all” (Bateson 1979 p. 15). Following Bateson’s line of thought, phenomena like netdating

likewise get their meaning from social context. According to Bateson, our consciousness is constituted of an inner map of reality, and we understand phenomena from their placement on this map. The map is not reality, but it attaches meaning to our reality. Placing a phenomenon on the map is framing the phenomenon, and thereby making it meaningful (cf. Wilken 2001 p. 36). We frame individually when we see and understand a thing, and we frame socially when we collectively ascribe meaning to a social phenomenon. Thus, when young people discuss a social phenomenon like netdating, they frame it by placing it on a map of their social reality, and they ascribe meaning to it from its position in the social system. Presumably, netdating qua an already existing phenomenon had a place and a meaning before the group discussions but, throughout the focus group discussions, the internalized norms and guidelines according to which the phenomenon is framed were made explicit. Thereby, I do not argue that netdating per se does not contribute to the production of meaning through its interaction with other social actors such as other dating institutions and individuals. However, an investigation of this aspect would be too far removed from the purpose of this paper.

How do the two groups of young people frame netdating then? Who is active in netdating, why, and what do others think of it? According to the young Danes, we are witnessing a change of opinion on the subject right now: due to its character of contact forum, netdating is strongly related to the personal columns, which is why it has hitherto been rather tabooed. However, although still combating some prejudices, netdating is now gaining a more legitimate status among young Danes. Among the young Frenchmen, by contrast, no change is in sight. Netdating is still a

⁵ According to Eurostat (www.europa.eu.int/comm/eurostat) 8.2% of Danish households had access to the Internet from their homes in 1998 while the corresponding number in France was 3.9%. In 2001 the number had increased to 58.6% in Denmark while it in France was 30.1%. This was an increase of 11 percentage points in one year in France while it was ‘only’ seven percentage points in Denmark. This means that the spread of the Internet in France has only really been going on for two years while the Danish increase has already begun to fade a bit.



tabooed contact forum and the young people agree on this from the very beginning.

The Danish group initially frames netdating and netdaters by relating them to the taboos that are traditionally connected to personal ads. The first one being the probable connection between netdating and sex.

Moderator: How much do you know about netdating in Denmark? – Is it widespread; which sites do you know; who makes use of which sites?

Mette: Dating.dk... and then there is this [Jens: then there is..] jubii-dating, I think.

Jens: Then there is that one where it is all about sex... what's it called... scor.dk

Mette: Scor.dk yes

Jens: ... I have heard! [roar of laughter from the rest of the group]

According to the group, the sex-aspect of netdating is obviously not the most characteristic aspect of netdating in general, but only characteristic of the site scor.dk. Of course, to some people, netdating may primarily be about sex, but the young people estimate this to be the exception rather than the rule. This is further emphasized later when they discuss the users of netdating: The girls...

Jens: [with humour in his voice] They are whores [laughter from the others]

Jens: No, no..

Søren: I dated some really nice girls..

Once again a prejudice is to be contradicted. Some might agree with what Jens just expressed, but it is not true according to the group. The users of netdating are normal people and not marginalized in any way.

Mette: Well, they are very ordinary people!

Katrine: Yea, yea

Mette: They are not...socially disabled in any way or... something.. I don't think so.

Jens: I don't think that they seem specially apart... from normal Denmark either.

Anne: Aren't they a bit shy? Katrine: yes..?

Mette: I don't really think so..

Søren: I don't think so.. not necessarily. Mette: mm..

Anne: What about.. it's my impression that the guys who usually go there are..

Katrine: I think so too!

Anne: .. that it would be shy guys who don't – like you said Mette - who don't dare to go and stand in front of the girl in the bar, whereas the girls maybe.. there I had like it might be the same..

Line: No, at that point I just have the opposite impression. At high school I saw that those who chatted a lot and so, it was like.. you know.. my friends.. they were some of the most in-guys.. [Søren: yes] who were able to make silly jokes [Søren: yes] on the mail... where I maybe.. I am a lot more shy ... I think, oh, what the hell am I going to write to them and.. [Søren: yes] .. I mean, there it was quite the opposite...

Anne and Katrine, who have not tried netdating, advance some prejudices that the rest of the group may explicitly contradict. Especially the netdating part of the

group clearly tries to establish netdating, netdaters and hence themselves as normal. Nevertheless, the group is still unfamiliar with the idea of actually finding a boy- or girlfriend on the Internet,

Moderator: How would you react if one of your friends told you that he had met his girlfriend on the Internet?

[Mette tells a story of one who actually did meet his girlfriend on the net two years ago]

Line: Ok, I think I would.. think: Wow! But..

Anne: I would laugh. Line: Yes, I would also laugh and think...

[chat around the table: So would the others]

Søren: You hear about more and more and in that way you become more positive towards it yourself.. [Jens: Yeah, yeah,]

Søren: It's like that.. you see.. but two years ago it would be more like..

Mette: But two years ago there was a reason for her not to tell it to everybody..

Jens: If I came home telling my parents that I met a girl on the Internet, they would like knit their eyebrows too...

Mette: Yeah, like what.. err.. can't you meet her in a normal way?

Jens: But.. it's a bit.. had it been better if I had been boozed up and met a stoned girl on a disco somewhere?

Søren: Yeah... Anne: Yeah...

Mette: Yes, and had brought her back home to sleep and then you found out... then you said hi the day after and... what was your name again? I mean..

Søren: Exactly!

Jens: Then, I think it becomes more and more acceptable...

Søren: You just have to get used to it.. I mean.. I just think so.

Anne: My mom and dad would damn look..!

Katrine: mmm [...]

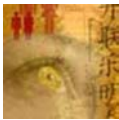
Mette: I don't think I would be able to tell it to my family...which this girl didn't either..

Anne: No, me neither.. I don't think I would tell them..

Among friends, netdating is equal to other ways of meeting people. Facing the parents, however, netdating is still tabooed and something which causes embarrassment. Notice that they still use the word 'normal' about other ways of meeting people.

As already mentioned, netdating is strongly influenced by the status of personal ads. According to the group, these are only for 'sad' people who seem ludicrous and desperate and the young people would definitely not like to be branded as desperate: "Mette: a desperate guy.. it's the biggest turn off ever!". They would never answer personal ads. The advantage of the Internet over personal ads is the fact that you are not stamped as desperate or lonely. Additionally, an advert on the Internet leaves more room for a description of *who* you are.

Thus, when the Danish group frames netdating, they do it by situating netdating in relation to other ways of meeting people and by challenging existing prejudices. Netdating is for ordinary people, unlike personal ads that are for sad personalities. Netdating is at the same level as other common meeting places like e.g. discotheques, friends, associations etc., although it still goes a bit beyond normal limits. Obviously, the group seeks to present netdating as more normal than it really is. As the following chapters will show, netdating



contains other perspectives and is able to accommodate other needs than the usual ways of meeting, and it is therefore important to the group that netdating becomes generally accepted.

Before going further, we shall look at the French group and their framing of netdating. Similar to the Danish group, the first prejudice voiced is the connection between netdating and sex. However, where the Danish group contradicted the prejudice, the young Frenchmen agree on the confirmation of it.



Beatrice: Actually, I've..

I've.. especially before.. on behalf of two friends.. it's pretty.. we should say oriented, but.. sex..

Sophie: Yes .

Michelle: Sex?

Beatrice: Ohh, yes... sex.. it's pretty much sex.. Michelle: Are you serious?!

Sylvie: Ohh, yeah, yeah..it's.. apparently.

Beatrice: Well, that's it. Now, if you, wait, I say.. well, if you are careful.. well you'd better [Michelle: the meetings] yes, but if you go, actually, to a meeting just for fun and you succeed, making no bones about it.. [general laughter] [...]

Sylvie: No, but she's right... whereas.err.. well.. since the dating is too oriented.. err..I mean.. err, you make a selection ... err.. you don't know what it.. dating.. they all say.. yes err.. actually err.. it's just to have sex and that's all.. I mean for most of them..

Benoit: And that doesn't change? .. maybe the sexual affinities..

Sylvie: No, no, they.. err.. as for the subject.. err.. of the discussions.. it's too oriented.

It is apparently more difficult for the French group to discuss sex than it was for the Danish. The issue seems to be even more tabooed than it did for the Danes. However, both groups take a negative attitude towards this probable link between netdating and sex. But where the Danish group tried to remove any necessary connection between the two, the French group simply refuses to go netdating.

To the French guys, netdating is equal to personal ads, which are other kinds of mediated meetings, only mediated by papers and magazines rather than by computers. The girls on the other hand find personal ads more targeted because you choose a paper or magazine with a target group matching your age, interest, seriousness etc. In France you find personal ads in many papers and magazines for all ages and categories. You even find them in so-called serious papers like '*Le Figaro*'. On the Internet, however, the girls think that the risk of meeting someone suspicious is higher than it is in the papers, even though you target your search by stating certain criteria. You never know if the person you date is honest or not whereas personal ads are more trustworthy,

Sophie: ...You don't think there is a thimblerrigger behind, you know.. whereas on the Internet you should ask the question.. if you say..

Laurent: But you can find thimblerriggers in the big newspapers as well..

Sophie: No, but you don't suspect people of being thimblerriggers.. whereas on the Internet...

The suspiciousness of the girls, however, is mostly due to distrust of the Internet and its reputation. Likewise, it is more the Internet than the dating institution that is connected with sex.

Sophie: No, but people on the chat and that kind of things.. it has got a bad reputation.. because people tell anything..

Michelle: ..And sometimes it is ardent.. it's really too hot.. I sometimes.. [Sophie: yes] .. you know you come across, you.. purposely.. you don't hide purposely but.. you can see what they say to each other.. they say really disgusting things.. I don't know, it's..

Here, one could point to the fact that the Internet is not as widespread in France as in Denmark (cf. note 5). In the Danish focus group all participants have unlimited access to the Internet from their rooms whereas only half of the French participants are connected at home. The other half uses the Internet at the university or at Internet cafés. In connection to this, Jan Fernback (1999) emphasizes that the more you use the Internet and its social offers, the more familiar you become with cyber communities and the more you equate them with communities 'in real life' (Fernback 1999p.213). This is exactly what differentiates the Danish group from the French, and what splits up the French group in which Benoit, Laurent and Michelle, who all have access to the Internet at home, advocate similarity between personal ads and internetdating, making it a question of taste or personal preference. Nevertheless, it is worth noticing that Benoit, Laurent and Michelle do not adopt a positive attitude towards netdating like the Danes do. The connection to the negative aspect of mediated meetings in general, and the 'traditional' users of these, is still too strong.

Concerning the users of contact services, the French group says:

Laurent: You must really be lonely to do that... that's for sure..

Moderator: You must be lonely?

Laurent: Yes I think so..

Moderator: Why?

Laurent: Because you go to your neighbour.. and then you have it.. you have a meeting and then..

Beatrice: Well, some people are shy.. Sylvie: mm..

Laurent: Yes, yes..

Michelle: Some people live alone, are shy, they don't care..

Sylvie: Mm..

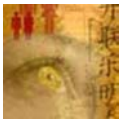
Laurent: Yes, as I said.. [...] You must be lonely to.. to.. have this kind Of..

Beatrice: Or..err.. very busy too.. Laurent: Yes..

Beatrice: You see, like business women.. branchitude..

Benoit: Or..or.. people like you said..err. who change city.. who go to another city where they don't know anybody, where they seek.. Sylvie: Yes. Beatrice: Voilà!

Seeing netdating in the light of the estimated users, the French group situates the phenomenon in the same place as newspaper mediated personal ads. The users of these



are lonely and busy (which again means lonely) like the Danish group believed. However, the French group accepts personal ads to a larger extent than the Danish group, still emphasising, though, that *they* are not lonely and do not need this kind of thing, "Beatrice: I have got a lot of friends.. you know".

In sum, the two groups assign netdating to differing positions on the map of social reality. To the French group, netdating is equal to personal ads and thus implies desperation and loneliness. In addition, due to the Internet's media status, they consider netdating to be only about sex. The group would not like to be associated with these meanings of netdating, and therefore they refuse to go netdating. The young Danes would not like to be characterized as lonely, desperate or hungry for sex either. However, they do not connect these meanings to netdating, only to personal ads. To the Danes, netdating is for ordinary people, it is for fun and it is a way to broaden your mind. The individuals in both groups seek to prove that they are normal and thus do what normal people would do. But why do they frame netdating so differently if they have the same understanding of normality? Which qualities of netdating make the Danes fond of it while the French group repudiates it?

A mediated relationship

Apart from the previously mentioned confidence in the media, two other important aspects of netdating as mediated relationships as opposed to face-to-face relationships have to be treated. Firstly the importance of physical presence, i.e. the importance of appearance, charm and the setting of the meeting. Secondly, the influence of the media on the relationship.

Concerning physical presence and appearance, both groups ascribe some importance to it – 'of course'. Nevertheless, to the Danish group appearance is less important than to the French. It has some significance; "Søren: You definitely make some differentiation at some limits.. a bit like the EMS⁶.. it's not the Alpha and Omega, it's just..". However, a picture and the vital statistics of a person are enough to show if 'he rules or not'. To the French group, by contrast, physical presence is a very important aspect.

Beatrice: .. We have to see, we have to touch.. Sylvie: Yes, right!

Sophie: Physical contact! Laurent: Mm, yea, yea, mm.

Beatrice: No, but it's right [...] well, it's a means [netdating], it's a means to meet someone, no more no less, but.. well.. I'll repeat.. if you do well, if you go on your date, well... fine, but if not you cannot go on like this [...] well.. I don't see.. err.. I think that I'm not the only one.. in front of my computer.. err.. with.. err.. looking for my soul mate.. dating, dating, dating, no, you see, I prefer... honestly, I prefer.. the world of flirtation.. but.. yea, to go out and meet people!

Sophie+Sylvie: Yes! (relieved laughter).

Naturally, it might be easier for shy people to meet through written text, but you risk ending up by falling in

love with the text and not the person. It is a narrative that bars the meeting, so that when/if you finally meet, it is like meeting a totally different person and either it all falls to the ground or you have to start all over again. Rather, the French group would prefer speed-dating because it lets you see the person immediately and because it is for ordinary people! The Danish group is negative; such an arrangement leaves all to physical appearance and does not let you choose yourself.

Katrine: No, I don't think it sounds like a good idea.

Anne: No, I don't think it sounds like a brilliant idea. Søren: No, I..

Line: ... Sounds extreme.

Mette: I would feel.. displayed.. like cattle..

Søren: I would feel like one who works..

Jens: ...Like a breadfruit fly or something.. it's a bit.. err..

Line: A bit too much like these reality shows running at the moment..

Katrine: Yea, exactly!

Søren: I would like to choose myself with whom I would like to meet. And then I would like to have the time I want..

Mette: Yes,

Line: Yes

And they continue,

Line: Then it's mostly the appearance you go for, if it's the seven minutes, right?!

Søren: Right,

Katrine: Yes.

Line: Because if you had two hours to sit and talk.. right..

Søren: .. It should be something only about sex then. It should not be about finding a girlfriend at least..

Jens: I don't know, but I could imagine..

Mette: But it's also because.. all that.. well, if it's about physique you can put in a picture.. Katrine: Yes

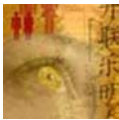
Søren: Yes, I don't think it'll last if you want a girlfriend after all.. Katrine: No, me neither..

Jens: I think it's so superficial.

Obviously, to the Danish group the most important thing is what the person says and his self-expression of being, and thereby it becomes important to talk or write a lot in order to get to know each other. To the French group, by contrast, the appearance is significant, i.e. nonverbal communication as well as clothing and cleanliness. Furthermore, the mediation of the meeting distances the persons involved from each other thereby making dishonesty possible, something which does not bother the Danish group.

Hereby we arrive at the second important aspect of the mediated meeting, namely the influence of the media on the relationship. According to Berger and Luckmann, face-to-face relations are the purest form of interaction. In this situation, the subjectivity of the other person is directly accessible to you through a maximum of symptoms like gestures etc. The interacting persons are close to each other and misunderstandings are less frequent (Berger & Luckmann p. 43sq.). Both focus groups are of the same opinion and they consider it more difficult to get an impression of the other person when he or she is mediated.

⁶ European Monetary System. He shows the 'snake' with his hands.



Laurent: Well, the computer, you.. I don't know, you don't see..err.. What's behind all that.. Sylvie: Well, yea!
Laurent: Maybe the guy is not natural at all and he.. he tells you that he loves you, that he.. he would absolutely like to meet you.. but it's crap.
Beatrice: That's life..hr.. Sylvie: Yes..
Laurent: Yes, definitely, but..
Benoit: You, you, it's harder to lie to someone's face.
Sylvie: Yes! Laurent: Yea, yea, Michell: Yes, yes Beatrice: Yes, damn!

The second closest you can be to a person is by talking on the phone, where especially the Danish group also finds it difficult to lie.

Søren: I also think, on the phone you are more honest because it runs so fast actually. I mean, you haven't time for thinking so much.

Anne: You haven't time for lying.

Søren: Exactly! It runs so fast, you say something and he has to respond immediately and vice versa.. you cannot but be honest unless you are really well prepared.

Katrine: Yea, Mette: Mm..

Jens: And in that case you almost live on a lie already.. to be able to lie that well

On the Internet, by contrast, it is easier to tell a lie. To the French group this is unbelievably repellent and you risk being deceived. Therefore the French group prefers seeing people before they trust them. The Danish group, by contrast, generally trusts the word of the mediated other more easily, "Mette: you just like have to!".

Thus, as a media, the Internet creates more distance between two interacting persons. However, according to the Danish group this distance not only makes it easier to lie, it also makes it easier to be open, especially if you communicate with someone from another town and you can be more sure of being anonymous,

Mette: Well, I would say, that if on dating.dk I talked to one in Aarhus and one in Copenhagen respectively, and I hadn't met them then I could be so much more open to the guy in Copenhagen than I could to the guy in Aarhus.

Søren: Exactly, that's what I mean.

Mette: It's for sure, for sure. For example, I wouldn't mind sending a picture to Copenhagen.. because of.. pff.. the probability, it's just... Søren: Yes. Anne: Yes.

According to the Danish group, netdating has two primary advantages. It is easier to get into contact with people than at night on the town where you have to look into their eyes, and you do not need to fear any rejection. Even though the Danes very well know that others seldom laugh at you when you invite someone on a date – even if this person refuses – they still fear it. On the Internet, you do not run that risk. Being anonymous, nobody knows that it is you whom they rejected. In other words, the Internet makes it possible for a person to open up to another person without risk. The connection between opening up and the fear coming with the increased vulnerability (Giddens 2000 [1990]) has been dissolved. According to Ulrich Beck, today's society is a risk society, meaning that risk is no longer an expression of the caprices of fortune, but an individual

challenge. You can calculate it statistically and often you can insure against it (Beck 1992). Internetdating is a way in which young Danes can insure themselves against burning their fingers in intimate matters and still get the intimacy they seek.

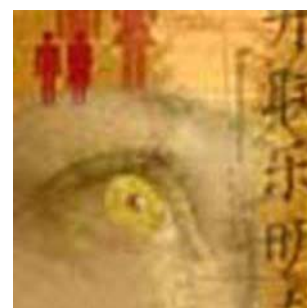
In his analysis of the transformation of intimacy and transformation of interpersonal relations, Anthony Giddens detects changes in the framework of intimate relations; changes that actually correspond to the experience of young netdaters. He argues that personal relations today have become "pure relationships".

"It refers to a situation where two persons engage in a social relationship for its own sake, for what each of the persons concerned can gain from a durable connection with each other, and which will only go on as long as both parties estimate it to satisfy them sufficiently to stay in it" (Giddens 1992 [2000] p.63 my re-translation)

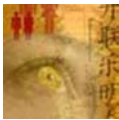
The Internet mediated relationship is an extreme sort of "pure relationship" because the people involved can simply turn off the computer when they do not feel like communicating any more. Each person depends totally on the other person finding him or her interesting enough to continue the relationship. At the same time the relation is non-committal, i.e. you do not have to take the rough with the smooth for, if no smooth is left, you just stop. "Mette: .. you do not have to meet..".

Noteworthy is the fact that the French group does not seem the least attracted by a relationship without risk: "Laurent: It is not natural!" Such a relationship

entails dishonesty and distance. It is like living in a made-up world. At the same time, the French group does not consider it risky to meet someone in the street. Meeting people on the Internet, however, is incurring a risk, especially for the girls. By



contrast, the young Danes admit that they are not as daring as the 'Southern Europeans', they have to check things out before taking action. One of the girls describes how she once, without being under the influence of alcohol, was about to invite a guy on a date. The others were astonished... none of them ever even thought of doing such a thing. The Danes would not tell the family that they had met their girl- or boyfriend on the Internet either. The French, by contrast, would tell if they were asked. Here we see a difference in patterns of action: According to the French group you do not lose face by being open in dating relations. The Danish group fears openness because the Danish patterns of action do not usually permit too much openness when it comes to feelings. Thus, in this connection, Giddens' general theory of pure relationships, combined with Beck's theory of insurance against risk, is more in accordance with the action patterns of the Danish group than of the French. Hereby, I do not argue that the French youth do not seek pure relationships at all, only that they do not



demonstrate such a tendency in connection with dating practices.

The differing attitudes towards the Internet mediated meeting expressed by the two groups reflect differences in the cultural backgrounds of the two groups. They do not have the same confidence in the media. However, this fact does not really matter since the mediation of the meeting, and not the media per se, makes the biggest difference. In addition, and even more importantly, they put different emphasis on the context when they judge another person and his or her statements. Thereby, the Danish group is more open towards a pure relationship without risk via the Internet than the French group, which does not allow the same confidence and intimacy through a media. The next section will examine how the Danes, furthermore, use netdating as a means to sustain their self-knowledge. An issue to which the French group does not really relate.

Self-presentation and reflexivity

Everybody needs to be appreciated. According to the psychologist Carl R. Rogers, everybody needs to send out as well as receive 'positive regards' (i.e. acceptance, appreciation, sympathy, respect) from significant social others. Especially receiving is important: "To perceive oneself as receiving positive regard is to experience oneself as making a positive difference in the experiential field of another" (Rogers 1959 p. 207-8). Often the first significant social other is the parents. Later it becomes other social others like a boy- or girlfriend or potential boy- or girlfriends. According to Rogers, others' appreciation of you founds your own self-esteem. Hence, in order to become a complete person there has to be accordance between one's self-perception and the experience coming from socializing with other people, i.e. between one's self-esteem and the esteem one receives from others. This accordance must constantly be adjusted: "The fully functioning person would be a person-in-process, a person continually changing" (Rogers 1959 p.235).

Following this line of thought, another dimension is added to the analysis of the use of netdating by the Danish group, namely the inner relation to one's self. Some people use the Internet to be affirmed, i.e. to receive a positive regard from another person. What is more interesting is that they, furthermore, use the mail exchange as a mirror reflecting themselves.

Søren: ..And it's like less committal.. [?] you get relieved of your things.. it's a bit like, I imagine, seeing a psychiatrist or..

Mette: Yes, what you say.. it is a bit like a diary where you get response..right, it's a bit..

Søren: Yes, exactly.

Mette: A diary-like, so I felt at the end. On which you get response. And then you get insight in each other's diary.

[...]

Mette: I know... only few don't read their mail afterwards and think like... is it what they wanted to tell right.

The young people describe who they think they are and receive another person's reaction to it, thereby permitting a constant adjustment of their self-perception: do they receive the expected response? It has the same

effect as seeing a psychologist. According to Rogers, the psychologist should function as an Other giving an unconditioned positive regard to the client, thereby helping him or her to recover the balance between self-esteem and experienced esteem from others (Rogers 1959). The mail-pal from netdating has the same function. In his analysis of self-identity in modernity Giddens writes: "The individual feels bereft and alone in a world in which she or he lacks the psychological supports and the sense of security provided by more traditional settings. Therapy offers someone to turn to, a secular version of the confessional" (Giddens 1991 p. 33-4). Internetdating is another sort of secular confessional in which the mail-pal additionally confirms one's thoughts. Since the two interacting parts still act within the framework of the pure relationship, nobody will receive more negative response than positive for, in that case, he would not receive any response at all. Instead the participants receive confirming response from a person who becomes more and more a confidant and thus increasingly significant while the relationship stays non-committal.

This mirroring in other persons is not a new phenomenon. What is new is that the young people are aware of this mirroring and make a reflected use of it. According to Giddens, modern society is, among other things, characterized by reflexivity. We reflect upon everything; ourselves, who and what we are etc., and so do the netdaters. As Mette said, they read the mail before sending it. Giddens calls therapy in modern society "...an expression of the reflexivity of the self" (Giddens 1991 p.34), and netdating could be called the same. Two thirds of the Danish participants found it acceptable to present oneself as a bit taller and thinner than one really is, which indicates that they reflect upon their self-presentation.

Søren: I also tell myself that I'm 1.84 even though I very well know that I'm only 1.82, but.. well.. it's

Mette: Then you feel a bit better right?!

Søren: Yes.

Anne: Ohh, I'm 1.70.. ohh.. maybe just hardly..

Katrine: Yea.. hardly..right!

Mette: You have to show it.. that you could be a model.

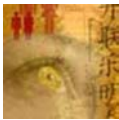
Søren: Yes, [giggle]

Mette: But I think it's that feeling.. really.

On the Internet, the participants find a possibility of living up to the ideals they have about themselves but do not fulfil in real life. You cannot see the difference between 1.82 and 1.84 and therefore it is okay to embellish the truth a bit. They do not change the facts in order to gain more social power⁷, but in order to feel better.

Mette: I know, that whether I lie about two kilos, well I don't receive more mail for that reason. But I felt better by writing it

⁷ Schofield Clark, 1998, has analysed the behaviour of young Americans dating on the Internet via chat rooms and she found out that they "change their appearance to achieve more social power" (Schofield Clark 1998 p. 168), i.e. to become more desired on the Internet than they are in real life, which is the opposite of the Danes.



in my dating ad.. 'cause I knew that some of my friends knew my nickname.. 'see.. oh, fine, it says 60 kg right and 1.69 right..

In this way they present themselves as they would like to be perceived. At the same time the mail-pal responds to the invented facts, thereby confirming them in their self-perception giving them a feeling of balance.

To the Danish group, it is not a question of living on a lie, but a question of small adjustments to make them feel more like the persons with whom they identify. They are very much concerned with understanding themselves *as* a certain kind of person and emphasize the unique opportunity of experiencing the life of another person on the Internet.

Søren: I think it's about the same as.. what makes people watch Big Brother.. every day I mean. After all, you sit and you want contact with someone, you sit and identify with other people.. actually, it is extremely interesting in that way. Either because you aim at... maybe it is a future girlfriend and then it has got an extra edge that.. [Mette: mm] that then it's extremely interesting. Then it's like being in love.. in a way... well, I don't know.. it's maybe going a bit far, but it is also extremely exiting coming home and read the mail to see if she has written and what she has written.. like.. have you got jackpot or..



Internetdating is an opportunity to reflect upon reality, and especially to reflect upon their own reality and their own selves. At the same time, it is stimulating that they never know when it is going to end. Each response is a positive response to themselves

and a confirmation of them being worth corresponding with.

As already stated, nobody in the French group had tried netdating. However, this did not prevent them from arguing that we live in a world of appearance, which causes some weak people to grow inferiority complexes that force them to go netdating in order to receive positive response. This virtual confirmation, however, ends up as a barrier.

Michelle: [...] the society.. it seems to me.. Sylvie: Yes.

Michelle: The appearance..

Sophie: Yes.. and..it's.. an instrument of transfer actually: in real life you are nothing at all, nobody notices you and so.. and then, precisely [Michelle: yes, I agree], you are under cover, you would say that you are so and so..

[Laurent: Mmm]

Sylvie: Oh, yea, we will desire when you are satisfied [laughter].. and finally it's err.. [Laurent: mmm]

Beatrice: It's all a story..

Sophie: Well, it has its time.. [Laurent: mm] and finally you'll live in this fantasy.. and then.. afterwards it's you.. you can't go further.. because you can't meet people because, exactly, you haven't got the physique that you said.. err.. so you are.. err.. there is a barrier.

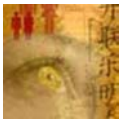
The French group thus turns the positive response emphasized by the Danish group into something negative. Netdating is connected with an increasing individualism and egocentrism which should not take over our way of living. As Laurent points out: Dancing with a syllable is not the same as dancing with a real girl. Netdating is a game, love and intimacy is not, and the French group knows what it prefers.

Thus, where the Danish group emphasizes the non-committal reflected relationship without risk, the French group prefers to see the other person physically; it prefers the spontaneous, serious and committed relationship. In the words of Scott Lash referring to Ulrich Beck, netdating offers a "reflexive calculability of the incalculable" (Lash 1993 p.51) which is welcomed by the Danes and rejected by the Frenchmen: "Laurent: It is to provoke the chance". One could characterize the French group as more carnivalesque in meetings with potential partners. The notion of carnivalesque is an adjective referring to the period between the end of the year and Lent where people dance and behave indecently; where room is left for the unreflective, the unconscious and spontaneous that appear each time the reflexive cover of modernity cracks⁸. Thus, 'affinities' and 'hormones' guide the French young in dating relations, leaving room for "the contingency which escapes the governance of reflexivity" (Lash 1993 p. 56), while the Danish group reflects upon their self-presentation and the meeting with the other. In other words, the Danes and the Frenchmen draw the limits of reflection differently.

Conclusion

Young people who have a group discussion of a dating phenomenon seek, as far as they can, to appear normal, i.e. they make an effort not to present themselves as desperate and lonely, socially disabled outsiders or people only thinking about sex. Apart from the sexual aspect, all these are connotations usually ascribed to personal columns by French as well as Danish young people, thus preventing the young from using these services. To the French group, netdating has the same connotations. Unexpectedly, the fact that the Internet is less widespread in France than in Denmark did not really influence the attitude of the French group towards netdating. Most influential was the mediation of the relationship as such. By contrast, the Danish group has changed its attitude towards netdating over the past two or three years and it is still changing. That may be the reason why the group so obviously tried to make netdating appear more common than it really is. Netdating has gained, and is still gaining, a positive reputation – maybe due to its media, the Internet, which is often referred to as the media of the youth. In

⁸ I am aware of the fact that the notion of carnivalesque has another signification within the field of History of Literature. The above definition is borrowed from the French philosopher of aesthetics Jean-Louis Deotte who uses it in his study of among others the theory of aesthetics of Lyotard (Deotte, Lectures on Aesthetics, Université de Paris VIII, autumn semester 2000)



addition, netdating accommodates needs that are not covered elsewhere.

Netdating offers a pure relationship without risk to the young Danes. The parties involved have nothing in common but the communication. They have no shared everyday life, no common friends and, thus, a break does not hurt as much. The possibility of intimacy is still the same, though, and is actually promoted through the distance caused by the media. The relationship is based on total equality, meaning that both persons must gain almost the same from the relationship in order to continue the exchange. Additionally, netdating offers a possibility of presenting oneself as the kind of person with whom one identifies. The individual mirrors him- or herself in the relation to the other and gains a self-understanding providing him or her with composure and balance. He/she has the opportunity to discharge and receive confirmation of his/her worth at the same time.

The preconditions that cause the openness of the young Danes and the negativity of the Frenchmen towards the possibilities of netdating are to be found in their differing ways of estimating other people and especially potential partners. While the Danes focus on the word of the other, the Frenchmen emphasize the physical presence and appearance, i.e. not the look but charm, and non-verbal communication in general. This difference is strongly connected to the drawing of the limits of reflection by the two groups. Where the French seem more carnivalesque and leave room for hormones and spontaneous attraction and, thus, prefer speed-dating to netdating, the Danish prefer conversation, and thus netdating, to speed-dating. The Danes prefer the mediated other and have thereby already transcended the first level of reflection. Considering this, one must conclude that the values, norms and patterns of action of the two groups differ to so large an extent that a homogenization of dating habits does appear threatened, despite the continuous growth of the Internet worldwide.

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