ECONOMIC VIEW

In the Quest for Love, Costs vs. Benefits

By ROBERT H. FRANK
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IS love for sale? Maybe not quite as directly as sex is, but economists believe that the quest for a romantic partner obeys essentially the same cost-benefit logic that governs every other market.

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Chi Birmingham

Economists may seem soulless, unlikely guides to affairs of the heart. But "Dollars and Sex," a delightful book by Marina Adshade, an economist at the University of British Columbia, may convince you otherwise.

In the book, to be published in April by Chronicle Books, she summarizes her own research and that of other economists, and shows that forces of supply and demand indeed loom large in the implicit market for romance.

Numbers matter. And while it's good to be in the majority in politics, it's far better to be in the minority if you're in the market for love.

Consider the evolution of heterosexual dating practices on American college campuses. Forty years ago, when women were a minority of the student population, they were in high demand. On some campuses, a man couldn't win an extended conversation with a woman without inviting her out to dinner.

Today, most undergraduates are women, shifting the terms of trade. These days, it's not uncommon for students (women or men) to graduate without having gone on a traditional date. Professor Adshade says the committed relationships of yore have largely given way to a hookup culture that many women view as highly stressful.

To be sure, supply and demand isn't the whole story here. Social norms often have an even stronger impact on courtship rituals. But norms are themselves heavily shaped by implicit comparisons of costs and benefits.

A case in point is the sexual revolution of the 1960s. According to conventional wisdom, the invention of the birth control pill caused it by eliminating fear of pregnancy. But that claim gives short shrift to the far bigger role of changing social norms.

After all, contraceptive devices like diaphragms and condoms became available long before the pill. By the 1930s, the fertility rate in the United States had declined to roughly two children per woman, down from seven in 1800 and near its current level. While the rate has fluctuated, affected by factors like war and the economic cycle, its low level in the '30s suggests contraceptives were having an effect on sexual behavior.

THE more profound influence of contraception was the indirect way it transformed social norms about premarital sex. In 1900, only 6 percent of unmarried 19-year-old women were sexually experienced, a status that carried an enormous social stigma. But the moral outrage summoned by stigmatized behavior can fade as the behavior becomes more

widespread. As the availability of contraceptives grew, reduced fear of pregnancy slowly led additional unmarried women to enter the pool of the sexually active. And because every such transition slightly weakened the original stigma, it encouraged still more women to become active, too.

Eventually, this dynamic reached a tipping point, after which premarital sex in many circles no longer entailed any social cost. Even with fears about AIDS and other sexually transmitted diseases, and with many women relying on forms of contraception other than the pill, more than 70 percent of unmarried 19-year-old women in 2000 had had sex. In many social circles, sexually *inactive* teenagers became the ones viewed with suspicion. That change is hard to explain without invoking the implicit cost-benefit calculations that transformed social norms.

American individualism traditionally favors letting people do as they please, so long as they don't cause undue harm to others. So it's also hard to explain attempts to restrict some sexual practices. Consider those who say states should be able to ban the sale of contraceptives. Even many people who personally object to contraceptives on religious grounds may find it hard to see how government could have a legitimate interest in restricting private behavior this way.

Yet because contraceptive availability changes individual choices in ways that can transform social norms about sex, it can cause indirect harm. Proponents of a ban may just want teenagers to grow up in an environment where they aren't expected to sleep with the first classmate who hits on them. A ban, though, would cause enormous harm, and is an ill-advised strategy for creating such an environment. But the wish itself is hardly mysterious.

Few human endeavors are more important than the quest for a successful romantic relationship. And as even the most soulless economist recognizes, emotions play a bigger role in that quest than in markets for most other goods. In an earlier column, I described persuasive reasons for believing that our emotions often steer us to better relationships than we'd achieve if led by narrow economic considerations alone.

Yet as even the most starry-eyed romantic should know, economists' cost-benefit logic also matters — as witnessed, for example, by the many otherwise attractive suitors who are rejected because their earnings prospects are poor. That the reasons for such rejections often lie beyond conscious awareness doesn't make them any less real.

Occasionally, however, they bubble to the surface. As F. Scott Fitzgerald is reputed to have advised a younger friend, "Don't marry for money — go where the money is, then marry for love."

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