Love With a Perfect Stranger: Romance and Resilience in Online Dating

A review of

The Illusion of Intimacy: Problems in the World of Online Dating

by John C. Bridges

Reviewed by

Stephanie Evans

Your client, who is troubled by loneliness and mild depression, asks you about searching online for a romantic partner. Knowing this person’s emotional vulnerability as a recently divorced mother with three young children, or an elderly grieving widower, or a young man with identity issues exacerbated by computer avatars and social media, how will you respond?

According to John C. Bridges, author of *The Illusion of Intimacy: Problems in the World of Online Dating*, digital technology is fundamentally changing the landscape of intimacy and mating in America. The importance of this book as a guide for clinicians is highlighted by the descriptions of psychological issues that may arise when clients embark on the search for love in the often-impersonal world of technology-driven dating.
Taking a critical look at this societal change, Bridges provides an overview based on qualitative research, with case studies and in-depth interviews with a sample of men and women who share their personal experiences facing the challenges inherent in online dating. He hopes that readers of this book will develop an internal dialogue and the self-knowledge to evaluate for themselves whether online dating is appropriate in their search for intimacy.

As an indication of how digital technology is altering the search for intimate partners, Bridges estimates that there are approximately 65 million U.S. dating site memberships. As a billion-dollar industry, online dating ranks second as the most common way to meet a partner, with friends being the first. The statistics and stories in this book represent a review of membership data from the top five dating sites: Match, eHarmony, Chemistry, Perfect Match, and Spark.

A recent article in *Scientific American Mind* referred to online dating as a “psychological minefield” (Finkel, Eastwick, Karney, Reis, & Sprecher, 2012, p. 26). Bridges describes why this may be true on the basis of two factors: the methods of matching and the accelerated stages of relationships that begin online. First, comparing matching site algorithms, Bridges discusses proprietary questionnaires that fail to demonstrate success greater than questionnaires that allow a more open, self-generated process of mate selection based on member profiles. Chemistry.com is an example of a site that has transparent matching based on empirical research described by anthropologist Helen Fisher in her book *Why Him? Why Her?* (Fisher, 2009). Not discussed in *The Illusion of Intimacy* or used by the top five sites are recent theories and research that could be applied to the matching process, such as theories about attachment styles as described in *Attached* by Amir Levine and Rachel Heller (2010).

Bridges illustrates clearly how psychological issues can arise at every stage of the online search for a partner. From the author’s perspective, as a participant observer in his research, traditional stages of building a relationship are often missed in the accelerated pace of online dating. The process begins with the profile, which describes criteria for a perfect mate and can create a reciprocal idealization. This illusion can lead one to an intense feeling of having found the right partner before even meeting that person.

Whether it is a coffee date or just e-mail messages, the early stages of these encounters can be emotionally risky. Bridges reports that individuals in his sample expressed feelings of depression and rejection, often blaming themselves when, despite their hopes, communication ceases abruptly and the fantasy partner disappears into the ether, generating feelings of abandonment.

A search for an explanation for this mystery disappearance may venture into the nuanced realm of “chemistry.” Bridges seems to believe that, rather than love, there is “lust at first sight.” He offers one question that may predict a second meeting: “Can I see myself in bed with this person?” (p. 26). Research related to attraction suggests that the “check-list” approach to selecting a partner has been found to be a poor predictor of real-life attraction.
Hence, it is recommended that the first meeting be sooner rather than later, when projections could be more entrenched and feelings more intense.

Bridges stresses that psychological problems can be triggered by the artificial acceleration of intimacy, with inflated expectations and perceived rejection becoming risk factors for mood instability and depression. This is especially true when an isolated individual becomes dependent on the Internet for social interaction. In *Alone Together* Sherry Turkle (2011) described a sad, stressed group of young people connected in a dystopian relationship with their computers. Reliance on computers for interpersonal connection can also be common among midlife and older individuals, many of whom live alone.

The Internet itself represents a reward system that can be addictive, with each click revealing a potential liaison with a new partner. Gary Small has demonstrated that excessive computer use can rewire one’s brain to look like the brains of drug or alcohol addicts (Dokoupiil, 2012, p. 28)

Bridges refers to the irony of excessive online searching for a partner as having attention consequences. As in attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder, incessant computer use can distract the individual from real-life relationships. Despite the abundance of profiles, research has demonstrated that people make better decisions with fewer choices.

In a cautionary note, Bridges acknowledges that the interpersonal process, when enabled by technology, can seem anonymous and influence how one treats other people. After a successful legal action by a member, the Match.com site now screens for criminal history.

Bridges reveals that the majority of online relationships fail. This is possibly due to the competition and large numbers of potential mates online, which can encourage a never-ending search for new partners. In contrast, a real-life relationship involves two people investing themselves in resolving the inevitable issues that arise in loving relationships.

Citing the theory of *homogamy*, or the tendency for like to marry like, the author relates that couples who are matched in terms of demographics, such as age, race, religion, education, and socioeconomic status, may have more compatible relationships (p. 140). This may need to be expanded in the context of an increasingly global online dating community.

For clinicians and their clients, Bridges advocates that caution intervene in slowing down the accelerated stages of online dating. He describes many dating site users as damaged, “without partners, without love and hungry for intimacy” (p. 49). He includes divorced, ambivalent, not available, dishonest, deeply wounded, and psychologically unstable as categories of the people whom one may meet online.

Bridges stresses the importance of self-knowledge and emotional resilience in the search for a soul mate. *The Illusion of Intimacy* can be viewed as an important antidote for the idealistic expectations that millions of people bring to the online search for love with a perfect stranger.
References


