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Introduction to special issue on Matchmaking in the 21st Century

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This special issue focuses on studies of contemporary matchmaking and dating conducted across the globe, and demonstrates some interesting cross cultural similarities and differences. It considers a variety of types of dating and addresses a number of pertinent issues involved in today's dating arena.

The first article by Dutton and colleagues examines the characteristics of married couples in the UK, Australia and Spain, and makes some comparisons with previous research conducted in the USA. Perhaps the most interesting of their findings is that those who met online are looking for slightly different characteristics to those married couples who met by more traditional methods. These authors suggest that the internet could potentially have major implications for the evolution of society given the greater diversity of romantic partners that it allows one to choose from.

Shtatfeld and Barak examine the qualities that individuals are looking for in a romantic partner on an Israeli online dating site. They argue that contacting partners on these sites is not made through random choices. Moreover, daters are looking at other factors than simple descriptors, such as age or height. Most contact is made with others who log into the site the most, making themselves appear accessible and available. Shtatfeld and Barak draw upon Social Exchange Theory to explain their findings, arguing that individuals are attracted to others who grant them rewards.

So much of contemporary literature on romantic relationships still draws from a Western view of relationships. However, Poutiainen's article shows some very interesting comparisons between Finns and American women's understandings of dating. Poutiainen argues that there are some important differences to be recognised. For example, relationship initiation does not appear to be as clear cut as it appears to be

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for Americans. Moreover Poutiainen contends that Finnish women do not consider communication, social relations, or personhood in the same way as Americans.

Some of the papers here consider the different types of people who are more drawn to different types of dating. For example, Whitty and Buchanan highlight some important distinctions between individuals who meet via different forms of dating. Older people and those who scored higher on shyness were more likely to have used online dating. Moreover, older individuals and those who were shier were more likely to consider using online dating in the future. Perhaps not surprisingly, younger people were more likely to have tried speed dating. Steffek and Loving found some evidence to suggest that online daters are not exceptionally different in personality to non-users who attend singles' happy hours. They also found that in this sample of single people at happy hour, that there was no difference in adult attachments (secure and insecure types).

Finally, Carter and Buckwalter consider the utility of an online dating site. They claim that online matching can affect both match selection and relationship quality. Their study found that couples who meet via an online dating system were much more similar on basic personality traits than couples who meet via other means. Moreover, couples who met via an online dating system demonstrated a significantly higher level of marital quality compared to other couples.

Some key themes arise from the studies reported here. Most deal with some flavour of online dating, and the evidence presented suggests that Internet dating is a successful technique for making matches. Furthermore, it is well on its way to becoming normalised within Western society as a way of meeting romantic partners. Evidence on who chooses to use modern matchmaking technologies is mixed, and could be a profitable focus of future research. However, Poutiainen's work suggests that dating and relationships may mean subtly different things to different people and different cultures, and this is a factor that future work on online matchmaking should consider.