

INTIMACY IN THE CONTEXT OF INTERNET DATING

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ABSTRACT

This article considers some aspects of intimacy that we come across in the context of internet dating. The research method is based on a qualitative analysis of 66 semi-structured in-depth interviews with individuals that have experience in internet dating. Internet dating is still gaining its importance in Slovenia due to being a relatively new way of getting in touch with potential intimate partners. In accordance with the nature of establishing intimate relationship on-line, experiences of internet dating influence the following aspects of intimacy: easiness in becoming intimate in on-line communication, fall of the intimacy at the transition to face-to-face meetings, experiencing internet dating as a self-reflexivity tool, increasing importance of disclosing intimacy and the transformed understanding of on-line-only contacts with emotional involvement, such as cheating.

Key words: internet dating, perceptions of intimacy, self-reflexivity, emotional involvement, cheating

L'INTIMITÀ NEL CONTESTO DELL' »INTERNET DATING«

SINTESI

Il presente articolo prende in esame alcuni aspetti dell'intimità, per come essi prendono forma nel contesto della conoscenza di un potenziale partner attraverso Internet. La ricerca si basa su un'analisi qualitativa di 66 interviste semistrutturate, riguardanti un ampio ambito di aspetti sociologici relativi all'internet dating. Nel contesto sloveno l'internet dating continua a rappresentare un contributo particolare, poiché costituisce una modalità relativamente nuova di conoscenza di potenziali partner attraverso Internet. Per la particolare natura dei rapporti che si instaurano in una comunicazione inizialmente basata sull'uso esclusivo della modalità on line, le esperienze di internet dating influiscono su aspetti concettuali dell'intimità quali la facilità a intrecciare relazioni intime nelle comunicazioni on line, la caduta dell'intimità nel momento di passaggio agli incontri personali in presenza, la percezione di Internet come spazio di autoriflessione e ampliamento del concetto di intimità emotiva, che modifica le modalità di comprensione del tradimento nei rapporti fondati esclusivamente sulla comunicazione on line.

Parole chiave: internet dating, definizione di intimità, riflessività, coinvolgimento emotivo, definizione di tradimento

INTRODUCTION

In contrast to its very beginning, internet dating is widely used and a more and more accepted way of searching for an intimate partner. Roots of searching for an intimate partner with the help of the computer go back to the 1960s when the first computer service for dating was established (Orr, 2004). Expansion and specification of internet dating obtain its proliferation from 1990s with a constant striving of the internet dating industry to reach the needs of potential users. The internet and internet dating as a place of getting in touch with a potential intimate partner with its special characteristics of building relationships on the basis of the computer mediated communication broaden the already diffusive concept of intimacies. How and why it will be revealed through this article.

The concept of intimacy is multifaceted and the definition of it depends on whom you ask what it means (Miller, Perlman, 2009, 2). Intimate relationships between two persons include extensive knowledge about each other, caring about each other, interdependence of intimates, mutuality, trust and commitment (Miller, Perlman, 2009, 2). Similar intimacy grounds are stressed by Lynn Jamieson (1998, 8) who defines intimacy as close association in which people acquire familiarity, that is shared detailed knowledge about each other, where understanding, knowing, trust, loving, caring and sharing play central role. Intimate relationships are no longer bounded in the field of family life and family ties, instead the concept of intimacy is decentralised by the un-standardized intimacies among friends, un-monogamous lovers, ex-partners, partners who do not live together, partners without sexual relationships, that is, between those who do not fit in the binary model »friend«/»lover« (Roseneil, Budgeon, 2004, 137). It is culturally and historically determined what the ways of »searching« for intimacies are and from whom (according to the relationship character) they may be expected and accepted. So the »new« technologies of computer mediated communication, which offer recently broadly accepted complementary way of getting in touch with potential partner in bars, parties, hobby groups, working environment etc. (Hogan et al., 2011, 16), not only have impact on expansion of ways of getting in touch with a possible intimate partner, but also have impact on how intimacy is established, how it is defined, how it is linked with self-reflexivity and consequently how it impacts other concepts that are part of an intimate partnership, such as cheating. The article will reveal some characteristics of perceptions of intimacy through inter-

net dating with the emphasis on:

- internet dating as a tool for self-reflexivity,
- easiness of intimacy development and self-disclosure on-line,
- fall of the intimacy in first face-to-face meetings,
- perceptions of intimacy of internet daters and
- perceptions of cheating of internet daters.

To encompass all the stated aspects of intimacy in the context of internet dating the article will base on the context of cyberspace as a »site in which embodied experience associated with the formation of intimacy, both on-line and face-to-face is mediated« (Barraket, Henry-Waring, 2008, 153).

RESEARCH METHOD

The article is based on my research of broader concepts of sociological aspects of internet dating. Research grounds on qualitative data collection followed by thematic qualitative analysis which is frequently used by researchers of internet dating (Ben-Ze'ev, 2004; Couch, Liamputtong, 2008; Barraket, Henry-Waring, 2008; Xie, 2007). For the purpose of the research I conducted semi-structured in-depth interviews¹ with the participants, who self-identified as having experiences in searching for a partner on the internet. Participants of the survey, among whom there were 34 men and 32 women, were recruited in three steps: first on-line through the e-mail invitation of those who participated in the first Slovene on-line quantitative research about internet dating in 2006 (made by Alenka Švab, Roman Kuhar and Tina Kogovšek) and left their e-mail addresses as a sign of their willingness to cooperate in further researches about this theme. Secondly, I used snowball sampling from contacts of the first participants. As the third step, an invitation to take part in the research was made on some Slovene web pages designed for internet dating (Ona-on.com, Freni&flirt.com, Flirtko.com, Spoznaj.si) and on some forums (www.med.over.net). Recruitment was accommodated to the response rate, by which the diversity of the sample was obtained (Taylor, Bogdan, 1998, 92).

At the beginnings of the research, participants were notified of the intention of the survey and of the contents of the research. To assure anonymity, they were asked to choose a nick name. Because it was found during the research that some of the participants used the nick names by which they are known in some internet networks and in some case there was no chance to identify gender of the used nick name, all nick names were codified in personal names that reveal the gender of the interviewee and assure anonymity of participant. Interviews were conducted from 31st July 2008 to 15th January 2009.

1 For the purpose of their study, graduate student of Cultural studies and two postgraduate students of Sociology: Studies of everyday life conducted some of the interviews.

Research included 66² semi-structured in-depth interviews. Due to a participant's current living in another country (Bosnia and Herzegovina), one interview was made by Skype interaction, all others were made face-to-face. All interviews were recorded with the participants' permission and transcribed in second step. Interviews lasted between 23 minutes to 1 hour and 45 minutes, on average about one hour. Locality, spot and time of the interview were suggested by the participants of the research. Mainly they suggested public places such as quiet coffee rooms etc.

The average age of the participants was 34.3 years. The youngest participant, female, was 19 years old and the oldest participant, male, was 72 years old. The average age of female participants was 33.1 year, and the average age of male participants was 35.4 years. Participants declared that they had been searching for a partner on the internet from at least 1 month to up to 11 years. Approximately one half of the participants obtained their experiences in internet dating through »accidental« or »secondary« online contact (Barraket, Henry-Waring, 2008, 153). They had no intention of finding a partner on-line at first, but were just trying to build a new friendship or were on the net with the intention of social gathering. By the time of the research, 42 participants were in a partnership, among which 31 partnerships (of 19 female and 12 male interviewees) originated in internet dating. Among those who were still searching, there were 15 male and 9 female interviewees.

RESULTS

Internet dating: a tool for self-reflexivity and market of choice

Late modernity intimate lives are influenced by the global concept of individualisation. Our life courses are more and more unpredictable and also more and more heterogeneous. If we concentrate only on the phase of life course that we spend living in couple trajectories, it can be very heterogeneous. Changes in decision making about building relationships and our persistence in an

intimate relationship are by the definitions of Giddens (1992) and Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (2002) a consequence of individualisation, which in the lives of individuals determines demands for a reflexive self which replace a socially determined life-course. Loosening of a socially predetermined life course does not lead to the reduced role of intimate relationships but instead the very insecure nature of it demands conscious decisions about getting in or out of intimate relationships. Attraction of (good) close relationships grows with the importance of love and intimacy. Changes in intimate relationships include above all obligations with regards to relationships and the expected duration of intimate partnerships³ that become more open, flexible and fragile. Because of chances, or better urges for choice of individuals, the feeling of security is lessening and paradoxically the quest for greater security is the product of individualization. The feeling of security and reliability is trying to be obtained in the field of private life (Beck, Beck-Gernsheim, 2002, 50).

Internet dating can also be viewed through the lens of Giddens' idea of the transformation of intimacy, revealed through growth of pure relationships and confluent love,⁴ which last only until it is satisfying for both sides and worth continuing (Giddens, 2000, 68). Openness of identity and reflexivity of the self become the main characteristics of a highly reflective society. The self is a highly reflexive project, it is a continuous questioning of our past, present and future (Giddens, 2000, 37). Reflexivity is also strongly embedded in the search for our intimate partner. In contemporary society, risky and diffusive marital market is trying to be controlled by technological and scientific services (Bulcroft et al., 2000). Internet dating in its first steps mitigates uncertainty of partner selection and has, according to the opinion of participants of the survey, many advantages comparing to the usual searching for intimate partners. Basically there are four main characteristics that stimulate »the lure of on-line relationships« dating: anonymity, availability, imagination and interactivity (Ben-Ze'ev, 2004). If we look at the main advantages through the lens of persons with experience in internet dating, the list of advantages is much longer and embraces charac-

2 Besides the final number of 66 interviews, there were also 8 interviews with homosexually oriented participants, who were excluded from current research due to the focus of the research on heterosexual population. Sexual orientation is believed to have an impact on predisposition of grounds that influence decision for internet dating. The context of internet dating could also be different due to sexual orientation, which is the reason I concentrated solely on heterosexuals. In addition, one interview with a female respondent who had no experience in internet dating, except her friends' on-line communication, was also excluded from the sample.

3 Discussion whether internet dating stimulates the development of intimate partnerships on the basis of a high level of reflexivity and on the basis of endeavours for the formation of pure relationships with confluent love as contrary to understanding of romantic love would be interesting. Mentioned distinctions that base on Giddens' theory of transformation of intimacy will this time be omitted; instead I am concentrating on the above mentioned aspects of intimacies in internet dating.

4 When talking about an intimate partnership between two heterosexually oriented individuals most modern days theorists use the concept of romantic relationships or romantic love (Merkle, Richardson, 2000; Gross, Simmons, 2002; Ben-Ze'ev, 2004; Gross, 2005; Illouz, 2007; Illouz, Finkelman, 2009). Due to the avoidance of use of either terminology, for the purpose of this article when talking about internet dating the search for intimate partner of the opposite sex is considered.

teristics such as the ease of the first contact, the comfort of home use, anonymity, smaller impact of physical attraction factor, feelings of knowing someone well due to the possibility of long conversations prior to face-to-face contacts, openness and ease of expressing emotions, reflexivity of the self; clear intentions impact possibilities to skip some phases in our search for the 'perfect' other, functioning of the internet as a market where search criteria are personally determined, less painful on-line rejections, flexible time use, economy of time use and economy of costs. Many of the listed priorities intertwine and depend on each other.

It is interesting that there are two stated advantages that could fit in two main contradictory theories of intimate lives. On the one hand there is the advantage of self-reflexivity which supports Giddens' idea of transformation of intimacy and the concept of the reflexive self:

I tried to maintain the communication with as many people as possible, even with those people where I knew right away that I do not want to meet them face to face. But it seemed important to me that communication develops to its final point. /.../ Because it seemed very interesting to me: by this you get to know yourself and others, you learn how to communicate, and at the same time you check: you check yourself, whether your expectations are too narrow, too wide, too high, too low. /.../ If you broaden your communication and you learn how other people communicate and what they are like, what kind of demands they have, I think that by this knowledge you open yourself. By this you come out of your patterns. We all have an idea of what sort of people we like and who we don't like. These ideas are narrow, whether we want it or not. I think that we are not aware of it, and that I broadened or changed my expectations with the help of the internet. /.../ This was one aspect, I think, where I couldn't be different as otherwise, but where I could develop myself. This I think is one of the great advantages of the internet. (Jana, 42)

Jana clearly estimates her internet dating experiences as a self-reflexive project of constant search for who she is and what she wants, all that in the context of on-line communication with a potential intimate partner. She defines her internet dating experience as a place where she could develop herself. Similarly, other participants mentioned their self-reflexivity concept when talking about the contents of their profiles. Through on-line communication with other people they found out that it is hard to give information or presentations of themselves that are congruent with other's view of them. That is also the reason for questioning who they really are, what they really like and what kind of people they are actually looking for:

/.../ I also had wrong perceptions of myself and if I wrote it down in a profile, half of it would be wrong. (Domen, 24)

Contrary we come across the advantage of functioning of the internet as a market where search criteria are personally determined. The idea of internet dating in the context of a market metaphor or »relationshopping« (Heino et al., 2010) could fit in the concept of Bauman's idea of »liquid love« (2003), where desire is privileged over intimacy. On-line dating is from this point of view seen as a market where people can fulfil their rational choices:

On portals you have partners just like on the shelves in the market. You can pass from one to another and you read the profile. /.../ you can send more offers at the same time, something that wouldn't work if you were getting to know a person the usual way. /.../ Here it is as I said: there are many choices, everything is open, and if it seems to you that what you see is close to being real, then you decide. (Miha, 25)

It is different (the way of getting to know people on internet, note T. Žakelj). Actually you come, look around a bit, and choose. Almost as you would buy a car. (Nives, 25)

Again internet dating cannot be seen only as a field of rational choice or on the other side a field of a self-reflexive opening towards others or searching for ourselves. It gives opportunities for both ways of getting in touch with potential intimate partners.

Easiness of intimacy and self-disclosure

Internet is a place of great opportunities that enable building several relationships. Either intentional or accidental contacts with different people not only make it possible to establish important ties with people who we find interesting on different grounds, internet contacts and relationships also ease the transformation of the self into who we believe we are. Internet relationships in their very beginnings include high level of self-disclosure and intimacies (Schofield Clark, 1998; Hughes, Hans, 2001). That is the reason why the feeling of the opportunity of self-disclosure and building intimacies can be stated as one of the advantages of internet dating:

I was on the net because it somehow felt closer to my heart. Because you can simply be more open on the net. Somehow I found that I can trust someone more on the internet. Here you can share more intimate things than with someone you see face-to-face for the first time. In that case there has to be a very strong physical attraction, not so much intellectual, personal attraction. (Miha, 25)

Being more open, being who an individual believes he/she is, establishing trust and intimacies are the possibilities that base on the grounds of anonymity. A decreased level of vulnerability in phases when we meet people on-line is the key to the perception of safety. Deep emotional self-disclosure and intimacy as its product create the feeling that we have known someone that we met on the internet dating site »forever« and that is typical of on-line acquaintances. The fast and more profound nature of on-line self-disclosure lead to faster and more profound intimacy. Due to the dynamic nature of development of relationships on the net, intimacy could be achieved much faster comparing to off-line relationships (Ben-Ze'ev, 2004; McKenna et al., 2002). One of the many paradoxes of internet dating is revealed here, on the one hand we can know what the feelings of someone are, what he/she thinks, what his/her deepest thoughts are, but on the other hand we can hardly know any personal data of the same individual. Or as Ben-Ze'ev puts it: »...it is more likely that in cyberspace the process of self-disclosure will be linear, moving in a unidirectional and cumulative fashion from nondisclosure to near full disclosure (Ben-Ze'ev, 2004, 35). Whether called full disclosure or deep self disclosure in an on-line relationship, discussing personal and intimate things is not only permitted, it is much more – it is the expected norm (Ben-Ze'ev, 2004, 39):

I have to admit that I am too trustful. That I sometimes said things that I shouldn't have. At least not at the beginning of the relationships. That relationship often ends and then some strangers know things about you that you do not even share with the near ones. Sometimes I think I should wait for the relationship to develop, to meet face-to-face and that the relationship is in progress before you tell some things. But I had this feeling of easiness because you don't know who I am and I don't know who you are. That's why we can discuss really intimate things without a problem. You reveal your feelings here, your emotions, you analyse you life signs. That I shouldn't have done. But I did it very often (Nika, 25)

Hidden by the nick name and also often by to some degree fake personal data that have the intention of preserving anonymity in such a small region as Slovenia,⁵ internet daters have a feeling that they can talk about intimacies, about their feelings, emotions, about their lives without fear. In this case we talk about the »on-line disinhibition effect« which makes people on-line feel less inhibited and express themselves more

openly (Suler, 2004, 321). It is typical of on-line communication to include a greater part of more intimate questions and a smaller part of marginal questions which results in highly intimate discussions. It is hard to say whether the ease with which people communicate intimately is a trap of internet dating – when people are making decisions whether to develop a relationship to further phases or to finish the acquaintance, I believe it is more a condition. A high level of intimacy, based on deep self-disclosure is one of the main characteristics of the on-line phase of searching for an intimate partner on the internet. As soon as a relationship develops one step further, to face-to-face meetings, the feeling of intimacy needs to be established once again on different grounds.

Fall of the intimacy in transformation of on-line-only contacts to off-line meetings

Face-to-face meeting is a crucial point that determines whether the relationship that started on-line will develop or the process of getting to know someone will stop. Connected with the feeling of danger of self-disclosure, intimacy becomes the central theme in a cross point from on-line-only communication to face-to-face meetings with potential intimate partners. Fall of the intimacy is one of the signifiers of the transformation of on-line-only contacts to face-to face meetings (Ben-Ze'ev, 2004). Due to the loss of anonymity the feeling of vulnerability increases. It becomes harder to discuss intimate things, to reveal deepest thoughts, feelings, fears and hopes. While it is so easy to share intimate details with someone we know only on-line, the need to step forward and meet face-to-face grows, especially because of the clear aim to find someone to share our life with. Participants of the survey reported the loss of intimacy with the transition to face-to-face contacts very often. When on the internet they got the feeling they had known each other forever, this feeling usually disappeared in first face-to-face contacts:

In a way it seems to me that when you meet the person face-to-face it is as if you are getting to know him all over again, as if you had just met him, as if you must introduce yourself once again. Perhaps just at the first moment to break the ice. /.../ Even though you talk about intimate and personal things in a chat-room, face-to-face you do not cross that line, especially not at the first meeting. You still hold yourself back a bit. It is as you are getting to know that person all over again. (Urša, 28)

⁵ The profile information of internet dating sites usually request data such as the date of birth, place of residence etc. This personal data could, if it was supplied accurately in such a small country as Slovenia, threaten one of the biggest attractions of internet dating sites – anonymity.

The feelings of closeness and bounds that are created solely on the basis of on-line communication could be incredible. Anja wanted to get into a face-to-face meeting with a man with whom, she said they were like married on the net:

With this person we were like an old married couple or like a brother and sister or, I do not know, as best friends for the whole life. We trusted each other everything and so we wanted to get to know each other face-to-face. Then it came to it. /.../ But when I saw this man I became speechless, and I don't know, I just missed the keyboard and computer screen in front of me. That was it. It was such a hard experience. /.../ We had nothing to talk about. Then the conversation started but really, it is so much easier to write than it is to talk. (Anja, 31)

Space closeness and the fall of the anonymity cause greater vulnerability. In the first face-to-face contacts it becomes inappropriate to ask or explain intimate things:

Because it is like that – the more impersonal the communication, the more we dare. /.../ Then, when you are face-to-face, to me at least it seems a bit immoral, but it is inappropriate to ask or explain intimate things. (Miha, 25)

Regarding intimacy, face-to-face meetings with potential intimate partners that met on-line represent a step back. The process of getting to know each other starts almost once again. At this point it is important to say that people with the experience of internet dating that invest lots of time and energy in the development of an on-line relationship probably have bigger feeling of the fall of the intimacy, comparing to those with clear aims to meet a person face-to-face as soon as possible. In this case on-line dating can not be regarded as the start of the relationship but merely as a tool for getting into contact with each other.

Perceptions of intimacy of internet daters

Intimacy could be defined as a concept which encompasses romantic or sexual ties in close personal relationships (Santore, 2008, 1201). The main role in the development of intimate relationships is ascribed to the work of the individual, where intimacy is a »do-it-yourself« project. It is interesting to look at the perceptions of intimacy of internet daters. How do they define intimacy, which type of intimacy do they recognise and which type do they stress?

It is not surprising that most perceptions of intimacy focus on the distinction between disclosing intimacy and physical intimacy (Jamieson, 1998, 1999). What is surprising is that if we expected reducing intimacy to the

physical intimacy of the sex and seeing sex as all the intimacy you need as more common among men than women (Jamieson, 1998, 131), answers of the participants of the research are quite atypical:

To be intimate with someone, to share intimate things, is one aspect of intimacy. The other is physical intimacy. I can also be intimate with men friends, but not physically. Physically I can only be intimate with a woman. (Toni, 40)

To share some life experience with someone or to share your feelings could be much more intimate than having sex. (Niko, 41)

Mainly it is that you can be who you really are. Then it is opening to each other and trusting and getting it back. (Gašper, 29)

Intimacy is not just sex, but for me it is trust, the profoundness of love. (Marija, 42)

Physical intimacy is seen as just one of the aspects of intimate life. Disclosing intimacy is characterised by trust, opening towards each other and profoundness of love, with no gender differences in defining intimacy. It is possible that the experience of internet dating and the intimacy within it leads towards the strengthening of the meaning of disclosing intimacy and on the other hand also towards understanding of new dimensions of intimacy – such as the spiritual dimension:

There are several types of intimacy. It depends on how close you let someone. Whether on emotional, physical or spiritual level, from some point on there is intimacy. These boundaries are determined in several spheres. (Franci, 43)

The way we understand the concept of intimacy influences understanding of trust, ties between intimate partners and the definition of cheating. If it is clear that on-line communications with the intention of building intimate relationships present a great potential for emotional disclosure and its consequential growth of the importance of disclosing intimacy, then we come across the question of how internet daters define the concept of cheating.

Perceptions of cheating

Internet dating and all activities included in it, from e-messages to cyber sex call for a new conceptual discussion about cheating. On-line affairs can be in some ways more seductive than off-line affairs (Whitty, Carr, 2006). Perceptions of cheating which I for the purpose of the article equalize with the term *infidelity* could be

divided into emotional and sexual cheating, by which sexual cheating means having sex with someone other than your partner and emotional cheating means being in love with someone other than your partner (Buss et al. in Whitty, Quigley, 2008; Kinsley in Barta, Kiene, 2005). According to the great potential of emotional disclosure in internet dating activities we can expect extension of understanding of cheating. Do experiences of great emotional disclosures in the process of internet dating provoke any changes in the perceptions of cheating? To what extent do concepts of cheating depend on intimacy? What are perceptions of cheating of people who search for their soul mate by internet dating? And finally, could on-line-only activities without a face-to-face meeting mean cheating?

Off course, this is an affair. Because an affair is to go emotionally somewhere else, this could mean to work, to the internet or anywhere else. With emotions you are no longer with your partner. (Toni, 40)

If this lasted, if the number of letters increased, then this would be cheating. If there was a polite end, or a slow withdrawal and an explanation that now I am in a relationship, this wouldn't be cheating. But if you intensify and turn somebody on and you have a girlfriend otherwise, this is cheating. It could also be only teasing, but it is not my style. (Leon, 34)

/.../ I would feel deceived if Tadej shared intimate things with another woman on-line, I would. (Nina, 30)

It depends on what you talk about. If there are some very personal talks and seduction, then it is cheating. The moment deeper feelings are present, it is cheating. No matter whether you have physical contact or not. (Klementina, 29)

Perception of cheating becomes linked up with the feeling of emotional disclosure, which is a key element of cheating in case of internet dating. Emotional involvement and its consequences are unavoidable when talking of mutual self-disclosure in on-line relationships. Intensive emotional ties in on-line relationships have the potential to jeopardize existent relationships (Merkle, Richardson, 2000; Whitty, 2005). The concept of cheating again demolishes clear boundaries: while on-line relationships with emotional disclosure are perceived as cheating and the emotional involvement is a critical point of interpretation of cheating, on the other hand sexual relationships lose its character of cheating if they do not include emotional involvement. Sexual defeat is minimalized in case of lack of emotional depth, which leads to thinking of it as being »just sex«:

Yes, having on-line-only relationship can be cheating. Because you cheat more when your feelings are elsewhere, than when you cheat physically. (Anita, 41)

Cheating is an interesting notion. I treat it completely differently. To me it is cheating if a person is emotionally attached to someone else. If there are these affairs here and there, I now treat them completely differently, that is just sex. Ok, it depends on how you see it. To me it is just a sign. I know that in my case, when I fell in love (online, note Žakelj) it was cheating, a different kind of an affair. Because I lived for him, I dreamt him... (Marija, 42)

I do not know, I have a different view on cheating. These one time adventures are not cheating. To me cheating is when someone wants to sit on two chairs. (Aleš, 37)

Dependence of understanding of cheating from the perceived emotional input in the relationships reveals also that participants of the survey believe that on-line relationships could not be cheating when they on the other side believe that on-line-only relationships do not have the potential of emotional self-disclosure:

Cybersex or a long flirting with romantic letters seems to me as a free exercise. You can not cheat unless you are emotionally involved. (Žiga, 26)

No, as I already said for me this (online dating activities, note Žakelj) is not a way of establishing an intimate relationship and in this case it is not cheating, but it is the way you can cheat on your friend or your acquaintance. But this is not a love cheating or intimate cheating. (David, 39)

Some of the researches show that men are more affected in case of sexual infidelity, while women are more affected in case of emotional infidelity (Whitty, Quigley, 2008). One of the potential reasons is that men believe that women are in case of their sexual infidelity also in love while on the other side men's infidelity does not presuppose they are in love. Nena, a 36-year-old woman, mentioned her experience of an obliging man who fell in love with her on the net during the interview. She defined his emotional disclosure as cheating:

I had an experience that a person got attached to me and I had this feeling, especially when I found out that he is a married man and has two children, that in his head he had an affair with me. We didn't meet for real because I pressed hard on him when I found out. But he definitely was, somewhere in his head, in a love affair with me. And I think this definitely is cheating. (Nena, 36)

With the development of intimate relationships on-line, emotional cheating acquires new extensions. Personal (physical) contact loses its vital meaning, and that graduates to the point when even sexual cheating is not perceived as defeat if it does not contain emotional disclosure or intimacies. Definition of cheating of internet daters widens to the point that activities of searching for others or continuing contacts with people they had known before the existing relationship started means cheating:

It depends on a way of searching. Namely, if someone reveals herself to me really deeply, but in her mind she is the same to others, I consider it cheating and nothing else! (Ivan, 72)

Cheating is not only physical, it is also emotional, you abuse intimacy inside the partner relationship and you reveal things to other people or you disclose yourself to someone as deeply as to your partner. /.../ I also asked him a few times later and even before the wedding: »Are you sure you don't write to someone on the net?« He said: »Off course not, where would I find the time.«, so I completely trust him now, but I was worried, to me this is cheating. (Irena, 35)

The meaning of emotional defeat in this case could be overestimated while participants of the survey when talking about on-line-only contact mainly emphasise only this type of cheating. They rarely mentioned cyber sex or even hot talking. Other researches that concentrate on on-line affairs gave similar answers to the understanding of cheating. Emotional cheating can have the same meaning as sexual cheating (Whitty, 2005). Cheating on the base of on-line relationships is considered real cheating, which can have the same influence on existing relationship as off-line cheating. One of the reasons is the possibility of on-line-only relationship developing into an off-line affair, a further reason probably lies in the growing significance of emotional involvement.

DISCUSSION

Intimacy is no longer taken for granted, instead it has to be »communicated and demonstrated verbally through emotional disclosure« (Duncan, Smith, 2006, 168). Because of the relevance of computer mediated communication for flexible emotional self-disclosure, establishment of intimate partnerships on the grounds of on-line contacts can no longer be overlooked. Internet dating influences changes in the construction of intimacies, where it can be achieved among people that have never seen and (possibly) have no personal data of individuals they share their intimate feelings, experiences, dreams, fears and hopes with. Because of the anonymity that lessens the feeling of vulnerability we can freely reveal

our deepest thoughts and feelings. Individuals often »describe computer mediated relationship as extremely intimate and as »authentic« as face-to-face relationships« (Merkle, Richardson, 2000, 191). The more internet daters are satisfied with on-line communications, the bigger is their desire to meet face-to-face. And at the cross point of on-line-only communication to face-to-face meetings of the potential intimate partner, the fall of intimacy is usually confronted as well. No longer anonymous, no longer safe in front of the computer, internet daters come across the demands of building the intimacy once again. While intimate communication is normative for on-line communications, norms regarding intimacy in face-to-face meetings are quite different – intimacy is supposed to be revealed slowly through development of partnership.

If we concentrate on advantages of internet dating through the lens of intimacies, beside easiness of emotional disclosure we have to stress two seemingly binary concepts: the possibility of self-reflexivity and the possibility of a rational choice among available individuals. Internet dating on the one hand allows the development of the reflexive self with constant questioning of who we are and what we want, which is the central point of creating a pure relationship which lasts only until it is satisfying for both partners (Giddens, 2000). On the other hand, the functioning of internet dating as a market of choice can also be regarded as an advantage of internet dating, where rational choice determines the search for our intimate partner. So the negative understanding of internet dating lies in the context of prevalence of rational choice (Bauman, 2003; Illouz, 2007; Illouz, Finkelmann, 2009) and »marketing of the self« and »buying the other« (Jagger, 1998; Smail, 2004; Paap, Raybeck, 2005; Whitty, 2007; Heino et al., 2010). With regards to the opinion of the interviewees, both characteristics present advantages over the usual ways of getting in touch with a potential intimate partner.

The understanding of intimacy and consequently the understanding of cheating is another aspect of influence of creating intimate partnerships with the help of internet dating. Perceptions of intimacies are highly differentiated with no difference regarding gender. Because of the potential of self-disclosure and emotional involvement through internet dating, disclosing intimacy gains its importance compared to physical (sexual) intimacy. The concept of intimacy broadens and deepens – by the stated importance of disclosing intimacy that influences the understanding of on-line emotional involvement without a face-to-face contact as cheating and by reducing the importance of physical intimacy when it has no character of emotional ties.

To conclude, there is no doubt internet dating has its influence on the concept of intimacy – to what extent in terms of off-line relationships should be questioned in further researches.

INTIMNOST V KONTEKSTU SPOZNAVANJA PREK SPLETA

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POVZETEK

Spoznavanje potencialnega partnerja/ke prek spleta kot način spoznavanja s svojimi posebnostmi v graditvi partnerskih odnosov, širi že tako širok in težko opredeljiv koncept intimnosti. Načini vzpostavljanja intimnih odnosov in pričakovanja glede tega, od koga se intimnost lahko pričakuje ali sprejme, so kulturno in zgodovinsko pogojeni. Nove tehnologije in z njimi računalniško posredovana komunikacija ponujajo vse bolj sprejet način spoznavanja potencialnega partnerja/ke prek spleta, ki dopolnjuje klasične načine spoznavanja na raznih prireditvah, na delovnih mestih, v prostočasnih dejavnostih, lokalih ipd. Spoznavanje prek spleta ne vpliva zgolj na prostor srečanja »sorodne duše«, temveč ima vpliv tudi na koncept vzpostavljanja intimnosti in njenega dožemanja, definiranja, povezovanja s samo-refleksivnostjo in posledično tudi na percepcije konceptov, ki so tesno povezani s pojmovanjem intimnosti. Članek razkriva nekatere značilnosti pojmovanja intimnosti, na katere vpliva spoznavanje prek spleta, pri čemer bodo izpostavljeni naslednji vidiki: vzpostavljanje intimnosti v on-line komunikaciji, padec intimnosti ob prehodu na osebna srečanja v živo, pojmovanja intimnosti in varanja ter razumevanje spoznavanja prek spleta kot priložnost za samo-refleksijo ali racionalne izbire med ponujenimi možnostmi.

Raziskava, na kateri temelji članek, je del širše analize socioloških vidikov spoznavanja potencialnega partnerja/ke prek spleta. Sodi med kvalitativne raziskave in vključuje 66 polstrukturiranih poglobljenih intervjujev oseb (med njimi 34 moških in 32 žensk), ki imajo izkušnje s spoznavanjem partnerja/ke prek spleta. Zbrano gradivo je analizirano s kvalitativno analizo.

Rezultati analize kažejo, kako se že tako širok in težko ulovljiv pojem intimnosti, preoblikuje in širi skozi izkušnje spoznavanja prek spleta. Narava graditve intimnih partnerstev na podlagi tovrstnega spoznavanja na različne načine vpliva na koncept intimnosti, ki ga opredeljujejo lahkotnost doseganja intimnosti v on-line komunikacijah, značilen padec intimnosti ob prehodu na osebne stike v živo, pojmovanje interneta in širše spleta kot prostora za samo-refleksivnost, rast pomena razkrite intimnosti in posledično tudi razumevanje izključnih on-line odnosov, ki imajo značaj emocionalne vpletenosti kot varanja.

Ključne besede: spoznavanje prek spleta, intimnost, refleksivnost, emocionalna vpletenost, pojmovanje varanja

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