

# Is there a science to finding **The One?**

Top psychologists are creating questionnaires for online dating agencies that promise to generate ideal partner profiles. We ask, is there really a science to compatibility? BY LORNA V PHOTOGRAPHY ABIGAIL ZOE MARTIN

**M**ichelle Givertz was 27 when she met her husband Marc at a party she went to with her sister. 'He made a terrible impression,' she says. 'He sidled up to us and said, "Well, how are you ladies doing?" I ran into him again some time later and he was flirtatious. I wasn't interested, but after I talked to him, he intrigued me. And I thought, "Oh, he is handsome."'

Chemistry took over and the two got together without anything long-term in mind, let alone marriage. 'Two years later, when he said he loved me and wanted to get married, I had to think about it,' says Givertz, who is a leading expert on relationships at California State University. She and Marc have now been married for 15 years. 'And I feel just as attracted to him as ever,' says Givertz.

So what made them compatible? Why did the one who initially annoyed her become The One? Givertz knew that she wanted children, but that she didn't want to give up her academic career. 'I wanted a partner who was flexible,' she says.

Marc was happy to be a stay-at-home father after the children were born, while she became the main earner. Had he not been amenable to that, she says, she wouldn't have married him.

## Changing world

A lot has happened in the world of love in the 17 years since the couple met – namely the internet. Givertz's experience is an example of how getting to know somebody organically can lead to love and marriage. With online dating sites promising ever more ingenious personality questionnaires and software to deliver perfectly compatible partners to members' inboxes, is there really a psychological blueprint for lasting love? Would Michelle and Marc have clicked online?

«Online dating is a logical shopping list, but offline attraction can develop the more you see somebody»

The problem with online dating, says Givertz, is that it's easy to overlook potential ideal mates. Even if she'd met Marc via a dating site, she might not have agreed to meet him again if he annoyed her the way he did at the party. 'We know from studies that exposure can lead to increased attraction,' she says. 'Online dating is a logical shopping list. But offline attraction can develop the more you see somebody.'

The top-notch scientists hired by dating agencies insist that – provided you choose the right site – you have a far greater chance of meeting The One this way. 'It's online introducing,' says Helen Fisher, anthropologist and chief scientific adviser at match.com. 'When you get a profile that fits your personality and what you want, it means you have to kiss fewer >>>



## «Our different backgrounds make us more compatible»

**Rebecca Smedley-Shulman**, 33, a dance lecturer, and **Amardeep Sachdev**, 31, an IT security salesman, live in Penn, Buckinghamshire and are due to marry this year

**Rebecca:** When Amars and I met through the dating service match.com three years ago, we both knew the key characteristics we were looking for in a partner. My previous relationships had taught me that I am best suited to someone self-motivated, active and who would want to share new experiences with me – exactly the description that Amars wrote of himself on his profile. But although our dialogue was natural, it was clear that we had very different cultural backgrounds. I grew up in America with a Jewish mother, and Amars' family is Sikh. I'd had previous relationships where religious differences such as this created obstacles and I asked Amars if this was going to be an issue for him or his family. It transpired that his family had a tolerant view and although our cultures were very different, there were important areas of common ground – principally, the fact that family ties are important in both communities. These shared values have meant that we're a very harmonious couple.

**Amars:** Superficially, Rebecca and I could not be more different. As well as our religious and cultural backgrounds being so far apart, she is a dancer, and I work in IT, play chess, football and go rock-climbing. But we work very smoothly together. In the past, girlfriends were jealous of my strong relationships with my family. But Rebecca's culture is very similar to mine in the sense that respect for family is paramount. I did ask her if she would feel the need to bring up any future children in the Jewish faith. For me, that would be a difficult issue. However, both our families are very open in their religious attitudes and she was clear that this would not be the case. We try to meet each other half way when it comes to our different interests, and when we get married this July the ceremony will be a fusion of Sikh and Jewish culture. Yes, there are things we have to compromise on, but when it comes to the important things – the shared values, the sense of family – these things override the differences.



>>> frogs,' she says. 'But the dating is exactly the same. You've got to get out there and get to know someone.'

Fisher, whose books include *Why Him? Why Her?* (Oneworld), says that it's more natural for the human brain to want to know the full details about someone before wanting a relationship with them. 'People fool themselves that meeting someone in a bar is somehow more natural than meeting someone about whom you know some basic things,' she says. 'How is that even safe?'

### Dating at home

The more we know about someone, the more our interest is aroused, so in that respect compatibility is easier to negotiate online than in the course of meeting a stranger late at night in a bar or club. Fisher attributes the continuing rise of

couples meeting online (one in five relationships in the US) to this very fact, in particular for people over the age of 25. 'Bars are now for meeting up with friends,' she says. 'Then you go home, put on your PJs and look at profiles online.'

Most experts agree that, broadly speaking, similarities between two people increase compatibility (note that similar does not mean identical). Two people might be ideally matched on umpteen dimensions in cyberspace, but have no chemistry face to face.

Professor Robin Dunbar, an evolutionary psychologist at Oxford University and author of *The Science Of Love And Betrayal* (Faber & Faber), suggests that much of the interesting research on what makes people click has been based on friends rather than romantic partners. 'Social psychologists have identified six

key elements for compatibility in friendships,' he says. 'These are: speaking the same language and a similar background; education level; moral/political outlook; hobbies/interests; and a shared sense of humour.'

When it comes to fireworks between men and women, however, it is difficult to predict how far these basic rules of compatibility apply. Sometimes opposites attract, but we know they can just as easily repel. Dr Gian Gonzaga, senior director of research and development at eHarmony – a global dating site that uses a member questionnaire based on 29 psychological aspects, from social style to emotional temperament and relationship skills – believes that it's a matter of degree. 'A very anxious person will be better off with someone who has experienced anxiety, even in just one area >>>

## «An online compatibility test brought us together»

**Stephen Harvey**, a software engineer, 40, and **Alessia Boccanera**, a teaching assistant, 40, live in Watford and are engaged

**Alessia:** For me, my venture into online dating was primarily light-hearted fun. I'd never tried it before and, to be frank, I was a little cynical about whether it would work. And yet the compatibility test that I was asked to take at the outset was incredibly in-depth. The questions seemed intelligently designed to draw out an honest personality profile – you couldn't second-guess the answers to try to present a good front. And so when I found I had scored an 84 per cent compatibility rate with Stephen, I took it seriously. On our first date, as the test predicted, we discovered that we are compatible in important areas. For example, our political views are similar, we share a strong work ethic and we hold the same views about money, in that we believe you don't borrow money unless it's to pay for a house. My verdict is that yes, the compatibility test did work for us – but it worked in that it was a good place to start from. In any relationship, no matter what your test score is, you need to work to keep your relationship strong.

**Stephen:** One of the reasons that parship.com's compatibility test is so effective is that you are not allowed to see photographs of the other person until you have completed it. When I saw Alessia's photograph, I knew I would never have considered her as a partner if I had met her independently, or seen her photograph before the test. Not because she wasn't my type, but because she was clearly out of my league! I found the test to be cleverly crafted, and so the high compatibility score gave me the courage to meet Alessia. It did seem slightly surreal when I – a self-confessed IT geek – found myself having dinner with a stunning woman who had worked for Armani. But we soon discovered that we had similar views. We talked about politics and religion and I suppose we are both traditional in our views. So the compatibility test did work, but it only hinted at what was possible. It increased the likelihood of a successful first date, but it has taken time for us to know that we do work well together as a couple.

>>> of their lives, because that person will be empathetic,' he says.

Gonzaga points out that people can have too rigid an idea about what qualities they're looking for in another person without ever having tried anything different. 'People often have a clear picture of what they want (such as being with a "morning person" or a non-smoker),' he says. 'But actually they are surprised that some of the things they think they want aren't so important because the person has other qualities, so they can overlook, say, one cigarette a day.'

Finding love and long-term commitment in the twenty-first century also comes with high expectations. 'Younger people use the term soulmate,' says William Doherty, professor of psychology and head of the marriage and family therapy programme at the University of

Minnesota. 'But it's a big trap. Wanting this deep spiritual connection sets a very high bar. How much use is the soulmate going to be when the baby is crying with a dirty nappy?' Doherty's advice is rooted in reality rather than rom-com world.

### Conflict resolution

Most experts agree that the more you know yourself, the better. For those looking for a new The One, post divorce or failed long-term relationship, the key is what have you learned about yourself. 'People get divorced and think they married the wrong person,' says Doherty. 'Everyone is the right and wrong person, there is no totally right person.'

Doherty's advice on finding love that lasts comes down to how we manage conflict with our partner. It's our conflict style that has to be compatible. 'If

someone runs from conflict and won't deal with it, that's a bad sign,' he says. 'Do they have a temper? Are they very critical? During the lovey-dovey stage they'll apologise, and there might be great sex afterwards, but notice whether the same things keep happening. These are all red flags. Couples need to be competent at handling conflict.'

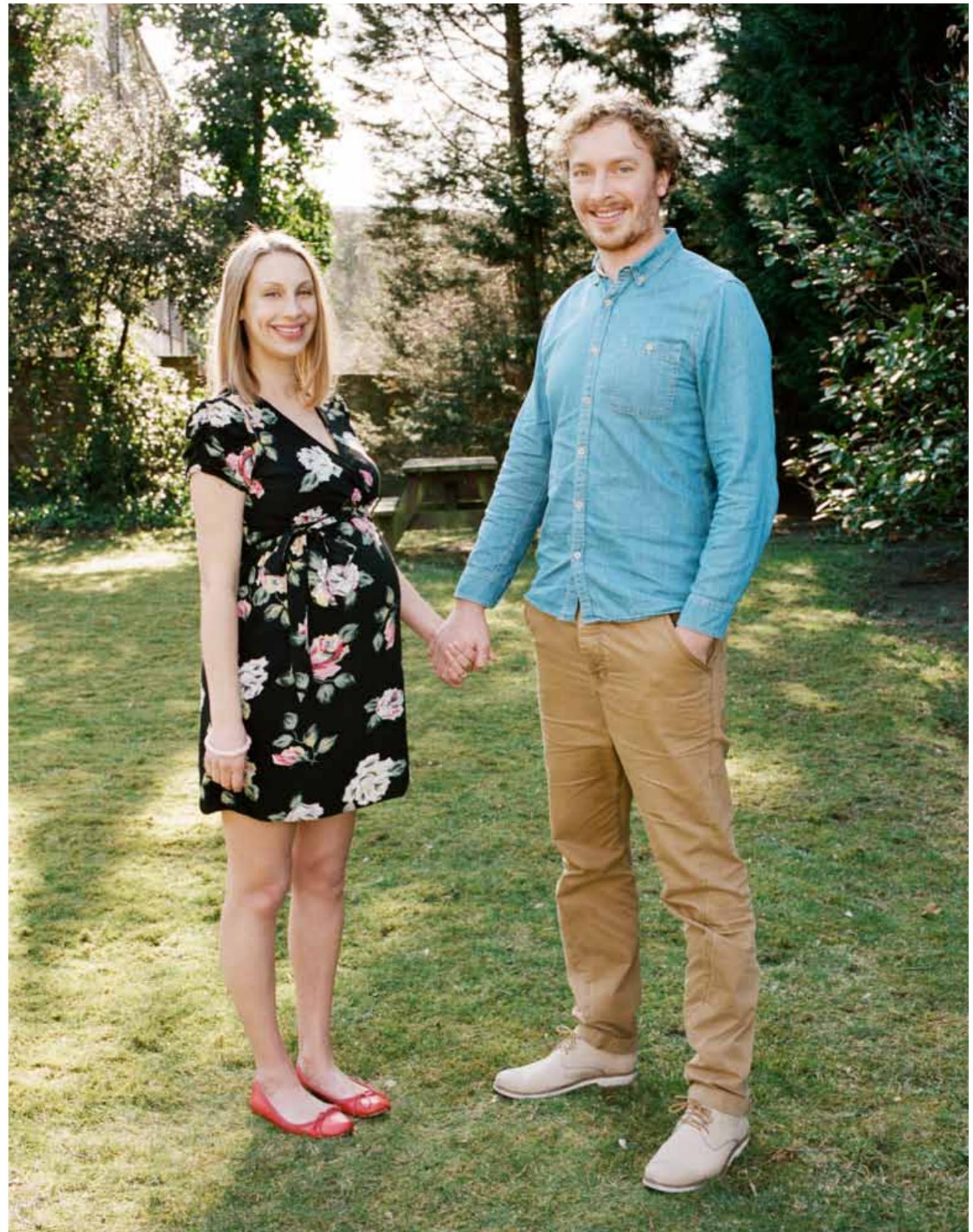
The magic formula seems to be physical attraction plus compatibility plus chemistry. 'It's that click factor,' says Gonzaga. 'It's related to compatibility. But we know it's different. There is a better chance of chemistry with someone you're compatible with.' So what is it that predicts chemistry? 'Ah,' says Gonzaga, who heads a team of five top psychologists. 'We're still working on that.'

## «Our compatibility stems from our parents»

**Louise Smith**, a writer, and her husband **Chris**, a graphic designer are both 32. They have been together for six years, live in south London and are just about to have a baby

**Louise:** Although I grew up in Yorkshire and Chris is an Essex boy, we had similar upbringings. Our parents were very happy couples, with similar dynamics within their relationships. Both our mothers are big, expressive characters and the relationships are genuine partnerships, founded on respect and humour. Chris's dad died five years ago. But when I did meet him and saw Chris's parents together, they had the same gentle banter, teasing each other and laughing together, that is a hallmark of my own parents' relationship. So, in many ways, we have both been working from the same successful blueprint supplied by our parents. We share the same belief that consideration for others' feelings is important. What also unites us is a conviction that you shouldn't worry too much about what others think of you, and that self-respect is the best way to earn the respect of others. There is the cliché that opposites attract but, for us, the sense that we hold the same view of the world is at the heart of our unity as a couple.

**Chris:** The fact that our mothers and fathers are very alike is, I believe, an important factor in why we interact so well together. Just like our mothers, Louise is more outgoing and organised, and I am more laid back. But while Louise motivates me, I calm her and help her to feel more grounded. A key factor in establishing whether you are compatible as a couple is whether you are genuinely honest about who you are, not just to your partner, but to yourself. It's easy to feign superficial compatibility in the early years of a relationship, particularly as men often don't always express their feelings. But in our first year together, my father died. It was a brutally difficult time, but what resulted was honesty. I'm not generally an expressive person, but I poured out all my deepest feelings to Louise, and so our true personalities were clearly revealed to each other. We both know exactly who we are now, and although things are not always perfect, at the core, we balance each other.



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