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The Love Meter

By David A. Kenny

The day before Valentine's Day this year, there was considerable press coverage of the work of one of the premier relationship researchers John Mordechai Gottman of the University of Washington. You might want to check out his website at <http://www.gottman.com> where he quite accurately describes himself in the following way: "His style of presentation is clear, informative and chocked with humor. He beloved by his audiences everywhere." With James D. Murray and Kristin Swanson, and the mathematics of differential equations, they developed the "Dow-Jones Industrial Average for Marital Conversation" or "Love Meter" that analyzed 15 minutes of interaction between a dating couple. They claimed to be able to predict with 94 percent accuracy whether couples would be divorced.

I was, as we used to say in the 60s, "blown away" by this number. Consider that some couples who are struggling should get a divorce, but they never do. For example, one member is killed by the other; both members belong to a religion that forbids divorce, or the couple listens to Dr. Laura and they stick it out for the kids to teach them the lifelong lesson that marriage is misery. So a 94 percent accuracy is virtually 100 percent or maybe even 150 percent.

We might wonder whether, if besides a blood test, should a couple be required to take a videotape test? Prospective couples would be videotaped, it would be sent to Seattle, and after careful analysis and probably a few double lattes, the researchers would allow some of the couples to marry. Would it not be a good idea to end divorce as we know it and send all the divorce lawyers to the unemployment lines?

Well maybe not. If no one got divorced, how could we get through the doldrums of our everyday life without stories of Brittany Spears' one-night wonder marriage, the fairy-tale divorce of Charles and Diana, the on-again-off-again marriages of Elizabeth Taylor and Richard Burton, and the verbal combat between Frazier and Lilith (ok, they are not real but they seem very real to most of us)? If we knew that our favorite movie stars would stay married "til death do they part," how could we cope in our everyday life bereft of the delusional fantasy that some day that star would knock on our door and run off with us? For instance, my wife insisted on a provision in our prenuptial agreement, that she be free to leave me if ever Anthony Hopkins proposes to her. I agreed to this condition when she said I could do the same, i.e., marry him if he ever proposed to me. So maybe celebrities should be exempt from the videotape test.

Much more problematic than unrealistic celebrity fantasies, no divorces and only happy couples would be a disaster not only for

country music lyricists but also for us relationship researchers. Take a look at our journals. What do we study? Our favorite things to study are arguments, conflict, jealousy, and that ultimate gold standard of poor outcomes in relationships: divorce. What a disaster it would be! Think of health researchers without disease, epidemiological research without death, clinical psychologists without psychopathology. These pale next to the prospect of relationship research without divorce.

Given the high divorce rate, it would seem likely that many would fail the test and so many more of us would remain single. While it might be a financial boon for owners of bars, makers of inflatable dolls, and laundromats, the lowered marriage rate would spell disaster for makers of disposable diapers, the Disney Corporation, McDonalds, and life insurance salespersons.

If the videotape test were instituted, (perhaps mandated by constitutional amendment) we would find ways to circumvent it. Those of us who failed it would just cohabit and be miserable "till death do we part." Alternatively, we could hire a surrogate to take the test for us.

But do not worry, and be happy. The videotape test will likely never be required for marriage. Why? Marriage today is considered to be a person's right, at least a straight person's right, and people have a right to marry whomever they want, even if they want to marry someone

who will cause them daily misery and agony. Liberals would be against the videotape test because they strongly believe in the civil right to make fools of ourselves in whatever way we choose, and conservatives would also be against it, because they want to defend the right of marriage, at least for some (e.g., 14 year-old cousins in Mississippi). Not sure whether it is a sad or a glorious commentary about the human spirit, but we do not want to know beforehand that we are about to fail at something; rather, we want the chance to put our own stamp on that failure.