He loves me, he loves me not: The thrill of uncertainty

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Here’s a Valentine’s Day scenario: You’ve just been on a first date with a woman you find attractive and intelligent, and things went well—at least from your point of view. The conversation was comfortable, and you share some tastes in books and politics. You’re still savoring the pleasure of the experience when you run into a mutual friend, who reports some good news: Your date really had a good time, too, and is looking forward to seeing you again soon.

Or your mutual friend hems and haws and finally shares that the woman liked you “well enough”—which anyone can translate as “bored to tears.” Or—yet another scenario—your mutual friend leaves you dangling. She says she has indeed talked to the woman since your date, but is uncertain of her feelings. She didn’t really say how she felt about the evening—or you.

How do you feel? Which of these hypothetical women do you find most attractive?

Classical psychological theory says that you will be most drawn to the woman who finds you attractive. Being liked is rewarding, and social rewards created positive emotions, including feelings of comfort and safety. This social phenomenon is so well documented that scientists even have a jargony name for it: the reciprocity principle.

But whatever happened to “playing hard to get”? Aren’t we most drawn to what we can’t have? Or at least to what we have to win? Aren’t courtship and romance and love more complex than simple reciprocation? A team of psychological scientists decided to explore these questions in the laboratory, and since this is the 21st century, they adapted the three scenarios for Facebook.

Erin Whitchurch and Timothy Wilson of the University of Virginia and Daniel Gilbert of Harvard recruited a group of women, all students at UVa, who agreed to supply their Facebook profiles. They thought they were taking part in a study of on-line dating, and were told that male students from other universities had looked at their profiles, along with those of 15 to 20 other women—and that the men had rated each woman according to how well they thought they would get along.

This was just a fiction—there were in fact no men involved in the study. Even so, the women subsequently viewed Facebook profiles of four men—all likeable, attractive college students. Some heard that these were the men who liked them the most, while others believed these men had given them a so-so rating. Still others learned that these four men’s feelings about them were unknown; they might have been very attracted, or they might have been indifferent.

The scientists asked the women about their thoughts and moods, and also asked them to rate the four men on various measures of attraction: how much they liked the men; how much they’d like to collaborate on a project; how much they’d like the men as friends, casual acquaintances, or as potential boyfriends. These ratings were all combined into a single attraction index.

The idea was to see if indeed women reciprocate when men find them attractive—or when they find them unattractive. The scientists also wanted to see if uncertainty is attractive. That is, would the woman be disenchanted by men whose feelings were unclear—or intrigued?

The results were clear, and a bit surprising. As described in the on-line version of the journal Psychological Science, the women were more attracted to the men who liked them a lot—much more attracted than they were to men who were lukewarm in their feelings. This isn’t all that surprising, and it
lends support to the reciprocity principle. But—and it’s a big but—the women were most attracted to the men whose feelings remained unknown. They found these mystery men even more attractive than men who openly declared their attraction.

The scientists call this the “pleasure of uncertainty,” and they also uncovered a hint as to why this dynamic works. Among the questions they asked the women were how often they thought about the different men—how frequently they “popped into their head”—during the time before they made their ratings. The women spent more time musing about the uncertain men than the others, suggesting that having a man in one’s thoughts can increase attractiveness. These women—the ones contemplating a mystery man—were also in a better mood than the women who had been flattered or deflated.

The women in this study had no information about the men’s choosiness in general. That is, they didn’t know if the men were uniformly “hard to get” or “easy to get.” So this may be a new version of the “playing hard to get” scenario—creating uncertainty to pique interest. And it may be a version especially suited to the 21st century, simulating the kind of information people often get when they meet on-line. At least at the very start of the e-dating process, mystery may have some benefits.

Wray Herbert’s book, On Second Thought: Outsmarting Your Mind’s Hard-Wired Habits, was recently published by Crown. Excerpts from his two blogs—“We’re Only Human” and “Full Frontal Psychology”—appear regularly in The Huffington Post and in Scientific American Mind.