

The cliché that men prefer hard-to-get women misses the point.
Men really adore women who are hard for *other* men to get.

The Hard-to-Get Woman

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ACCORDING TO FOLKLORE, the woman who is hard to get is a more desirable catch than the woman who is overly eager for alliance. Socrates, Ovid, Terence, the *Kama Sutra*, and Dear Abby all agree that the person whose affection is easily won is unlikely to inspire passion in another.

In addition to the supporting folklore, the hypothesis that an elusive woman is desirable seems to be grounded in common sense and borne out by our personal experiences. Perhaps because it seems so obviously true, social scientists have never bothered to test it.

When we began our research, we assumed that the hypothesis was true. Thus, we started out by asking a few college men *why* they preferred hard-to-get women. The men cooperatively responded with a variety of reasons. They pointed out that a woman can be "choosy" only if she is popular, and a woman is popular for some good reason. They explained that an elusive woman is inevitably a valuable woman. They said such women are usually personable, pretty and sexy, a combination that is hard to beat. They were intrigued by the challenge presented by a distant woman. They knew they could gain prestige by being seen with such a woman. On the other hand, college men said, easy women spelled trouble. They were usually desperate for dates and when they did get a man they became too serious, too dependent, and too demanding. Even worse, they might have a "social disease."
The Elusive Woman Cliché. In short, nearly all the men we interviewed agreed with our premise and could justify their

preference for hard-to-get women. We had a few dissenters, however, who observed that an elusive woman was not necessarily desirable. They said some women are not merely *hard* to get, they are *impossible* to get; they are cold and dislike men. Other dissenters pointed out that sometimes a woman is easy to get because she is friendly and outgoing. This kind of "easy" date, they said, boosts the male ego and insures that dates are fun. We ignored the testimony of these deviant types.

We began to collect psychological evidence to support our hypothesis. Several psychological theories could account for the fact that playing hard to get increases one's attractiveness. Dissonance theory says that when a person's beliefs and behavior are inconsistent, he will be motivated to change one or both of them [see "The Rationalizing Animal," PT, May]. In line with that theory, Elliot Aronson, Judson Mills and others have shown that when a person expends a great amount of energy to attain a goal, he will be unusually appreciative of it. When a suitor expends an enormous amount of effort pursuing the hard-to-get woman, it is only logical that he should justify his hard work by glorifying her.

Learning theory can also account for the hard-to-get phenomenon, in two different ways. First, G. A. Kimble's research shows that frustration may heighten one's drive level and thus increase the strength of appropriate rewards. When an elusive woman momentarily thwarts a suitor's advances, his original sexual arousal will be supplemented by the arousal caused by frustration. Under

such conditions, the sexual rewards she finally provides should be doubly gratifying. They reduce both kinds of arousal. Secondly, people may have learned to link elusiveness with value. Individuals may have learned that there is more competition for socially desirable dates than for undesirable ones. Thus, being a hard-to-get woman may have come to be associated with value and liking.

Finally, Stanley Schachter's theory of emotion provides a fourth explanation for the hard-to-get phenomenon. Schachter argues that two components are necessary for an individual to experience any particular emotion. He must be physiologically aroused, and the setting must make it appropriate for him to conclude that his aroused feelings are due to that emotion. On both counts, the person who plays hard to get might be expected to generate unusual passion. Frustration should increase the pursuer's physiological arousal, and the association of elusiveness with value should increase the suitor's tendency to label his feelings as "love."

So, our hypothesis seemed consistent with a number of psychological theories. We therefore proceeded confidently to test our theory in the laboratory.

Socially Desirable Teen-agers. Our first two experiments tried to demonstrate that outside observers see an elusive individual as valuable. In these experiments, which we conducted with Ellen Berscheid, we showed high-school juniors and seniors the pictures and biographies of a teen-age couple. We told our subjects how interested one member of the pair was in the other. We said that the teen-

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ager liked his or her partner "extremely much," had not reported any feelings, or liked the partner "not particularly much." Then we asked our high-school students how socially desirable both partners were, how likable, how physically attractive, etc. We predicted that the more romantic interest the person expressed, the less socially desirable he or she would appear to our subjects. Surprisingly, the results were exactly the opposite. The more romantic interest the person expressed, the more socially desirable our high-school students judged him or her to be. Apparently all the world *does* love a lover.

Undaunted, we regrouped. We designed two more experiments to demonstrate that a suitor perceives a hard-to-get date as especially valuable. Our third experiment was a field study and our fourth was a laboratory experiment. Both were conducted with Judith Lyons and both used a service that matched couples by computer.

Skittish Computer Dates. For the field study, we contacted women who had signed up for a computer matching program and hired them as experimenters. We gave them precise instructions on how to respond when a man selected by the computer called for a date. Following our instructions, half the time the women paused and "thought" for three seconds before they accepted the date. This was our hard-to-get condition. The other half of the time they accepted the date immediately; they were easy to get. The results were disappointing. Elusiveness had no impact on a man's liking for his computer date.

By now, our own levels of frustration were climbing. For our fourth attempt we designed an even more sophisticated experiment. We hypothesized that a man's knowledge that a woman is elusive gives him indirect evidence that she is socially desirable. The indirect evidence should be crucial when he has no firsthand evidence concerning the woman's value, or when he has little confidence in his own ability to assess her value. Alternatively, when a self-confident man has direct evidence about a woman's desirability, he should have little need to rely on indirect information. Thus, we predicted that when a man has no direct evidence about a woman's social desirability, both his respect and liking for her will depend on his self-esteem and her elusiveness.

In preparation for the laboratory experiment, we measured the self-confidence of the male subjects using Morris Rosenberg's scale of self-esteem, H.M. Rosenberg's measure of fear of rejection and E.M. Berger's items on self-acceptance.

The experiment began when the dating counselor told a subject that the computer had assigned him a date. He telephoned the girl, invited her out and then reported his first impression of her. The date was actually a member of our experimental team. Half of the time she played hard to get:

Mmmm [slight pause]. No, I've got a date then. It seems like I signed up for that Date Match thing a long time ago and I've met more people since then . . . I'm really pretty busy this week.

She paused again. If the subject suggested another time, the confederate hesitated only slightly, then accepted. If he did not suggest another time, she said, "How about some time next week, or just meeting for coffee in the Union some afternoon?" She accepted the next invitation. The rest of the time, the confederate played easy to get and eagerly accepted the man's first offer.

We had predicted that since all the men lacked direct evidence of the date's desirability, the men with low self-esteem would be the most receptive to the hard-to-get women. Although the experimental manipulations were successful and the self-esteem measures reliable, the results failed to confirm the research hypothesis. A woman's elusiveness had no relation to a man's liking for her, regardless of the man's level of self-esteem.

A Hard-to-Get Prostitute? We still refused to give up our hypothesis. After all, it had been refuted only four times. We began to sense that the hard-to-get hypothesis should be tested in a sexual setting. After all, Socrates was the first theorist to advise a woman to play hard to get and his pupil, Theodota, was a prostitute.

[Socrates advises] *They will appreciate your favors most highly if you wait till they ask for them. The sweetest meats, you see, if served before they are wanted seem sour, and to those who had enough they are positively nauseating; but even poor fare is very welcome when offered to a hungry man.* [Theodota inquires] *And how can I make them hungry for my fare?* [Socrates replies] *Why, in the first place, you must not offer it to them when they have had enough, but prompt them by*

behaving as a model of Propriety, by a show of reluctance to yield, and by holding back until they are as keen as can be; and then the same gifts are much more to the recipient than when they're offered before they are desired.

In our fifth experiment, therefore, we enlisted the services of a prostitute. With the help of Philip Lambert, we selected a suitable candidate, and collectively devised a strategy for playing hard to get. When playing hard to get, the prostitute would mix her customer a drink, then deliver the hard-to-get line:

Just because I see you this time, it doesn't mean that you can have my phone number or see me again. I'm going to start school soon, so I won't have much time, so I'll only be able to see the people that I like the best.

In the easy-to-get situation, the prostitute acted in her conventional manner.

The prostitute-experimenter used two techniques to determine how much her clients liked her. First, she made estimates based on how much he paid her, his arrangements to see her again, etc. Then she recorded how many times he actually returned to have sexual relations during the next 30 days. The results were exasperating. Once again, we failed to confirm our hypothesis. If anything, the men who heard the hard-to-get line were less likely to call back than the other men and they liked the prostitute less.

Back to the Drawing Board. At this point we decided that maybe our hypothesis was wrong. Or perhaps men preferred hard-to-get women only under very special circumstances. We backed up and started interviewing college men again, this time with an open mind. "Tell us about the advantages *and* disadvantages of hard-to-get *and* easy-to-get women," we asked. This approach elicited much more information. We learned that both types of women are uniquely desirable and uniquely frightening. Although the elusive woman is likely to be a popular, prestigious date, she presents problems. Because she isn't particularly enthusiastic about you, she may stand you up or humiliate you in front of your friends. She is also likely to be unfriendly, cold and inflexible, qualities a young man can certainly do without.

On the other hand, even though an easy-to-get woman may become serious or hard to get rid of, she will boost your ego and make a date relaxing and enjoyable.

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But dating an easy woman is also risky business. She may be so oversexed that she is embarrassingly affectionate in public. Your buddies will know immediately why you are dating *her*. We began to understand why our previous experiments had failed. The assets and liabilities of elusive and easy dates balance out. Men like both types equally well.

It occurred to us that there might be two components that determine how much a man likes a woman: first, how hard or easy she is for *him* to get, and second, how hard or easy she is for *other men* to get. If a woman has a reputation for being hard to get, but for some reason she is easy for the subject to get, she should be highly appealing. Dating such a woman continues to bring the man great prestige, and, since she is exceedingly available to him, his dates with her are relaxing and rewarding. She possesses the assets of both types of women, while she avoids all their liabilities.

Testing Our New Hypothesis. Lynn Schmidt took our revised hypothesis into the laboratory for testing. Once again we used computer dating in our experimental design. We asked 71 male college students to take part in a study to compare computer matching to random matching. Each man studied information on five potential dates. We told him that some of the women were selected at random while others were matched with him by the computer. Actually, all five folders contained information on fictitious women.

Each folder contained a "background questionnaire" on which the woman presumably described herself. The male subject had completed a similar form when he signed up for the project. We made the women's self-descriptions similar enough to minimize variance, but different enough to be believable. Three of the folders also contained five "date-selection forms." We told the subject that three of the five women had come in, examined the background information on their matches, and then evaluated the subject and his four rivals on the date-selection forms. On all five forms each of these women had checked one of 20 scores ranging from "definitely do not want to date" (-10) to "definitely want to date" (+10). The forms identified each man by number. At this point, we told the subject his number.

We made one of the women who had

evaluated her matches appear uniformly hard to get. She indicated she would date any of the five men, but she was unenthusiastic about them all. She rated all five choices from +1 to +2. We made the second woman uniformly easy to get. She was enthusiastic about dating all five men. She rated them all from +7 to +9. She rated the subject +8. We made the third woman easy to get for the subject, but hard to get for anyone else. We labeled this woman "selectively hard to get." She rated the other four men from +2 to +3, while she rated the subject +8.

We explained that the other two folders contained no date selection forms because the other women had not come in to evaluate their matches. Over the course of the experiment, we put each fictitious woman in each condition.

The experimenter now asked the subject to study the folders, fill out a "first-impression questionnaire" for each woman, and decide which woman he wanted to date. Then the experimenter left the room.

In the first section of each questionnaire, the subject indicated how well he liked the woman described in the folder. In the next section he evaluated her assets and liabilities. In the last section he assessed the potential date on each of six negative attributes, such as "she probably would demand too much attention and affection from me."

After the subject had completed the five questionnaires, the experimenter returned. She asked him which woman he wished to date and why. Frequently men who chose the selectively hard-to-get woman said, "She chose me, and that made me feel really good" or "she seemed more selective than the others." Men often rejected the uniformly easy-to-get woman because "she must be awfully hard up for a date; she really would take anyone." They described the uniformly hard-to-get woman as a "challenge" but more often rejected her because she appeared "snotty" or "too picky." At the end of the session, the experimenter explained the nature of the experiment and gave the subject five names of women who actually had been computer matched with him.

With some trepidation, we began to analyze the data on our sixth experiment. This time we had predicted that the most desirable woman would be the one who was easy to get for the subject but hard to

get for others—our selectively hard-to-get woman.

The Selectively Elusive Woman. For once, the results were gratifying. Nearly all the subjects preferred to date the selectively hard-to-get woman, and they also liked her the best. Her rivals, the uniformly hard to get, the uniformly easy to get and the controls, who did not fill out first-impression questionnaires, lagged far behind our selectively elusive woman on all measures of desirability.

Greatly encouraged by these initial results, we set out to ascertain *why* the selective woman is more popular than her rivals. Before the experiment, we had predicted that the selectively hard-to-get woman possesses all the assets and none of the liabilities of both the elusive and the easy woman. Specifically, we had said, she should embody the friendliness, warmth, and outgoing personality of the available woman and the popularity and selectivity of the distant woman. In the second part of the questionnaire, the subjects had evaluated their matches on 10 sets of polar characteristics: friendly-unfriendly, cold-warm, shy-outgoing, selective-nonsselective, popular-unpopular, etc. We compared the men's impressions of the four types of women. Again the results provided compelling support for our hypothesis. The selective woman was most like the easy-to-get woman on friendliness, warmth, and outgoing personality, and she was most like the hard-to-get woman on selectivity and popularity.

Delighted, we examined our last bit of data. In the third part of the questionnaire, the men had anticipated problems they might have with each date; she would embarrass him in public, become too dependent, demand too much attention, etc. We expected that the men would foresee fewer problems with a selectively hard-to-get woman than with an easy-to-get date. The data verified our expectations. The subjects were less apprehensive about the behavior of the selective woman than about the actions of the easy woman.

After five futile attempts to understand the hard-to-get phenomenon, it appears that we have finally gained the glimmers of an understanding of the process. Our findings suggest that a woman will be most successful in attracting any given man, if she appears to be highly selective in her expressions of affection. □