

Book Review

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Raluca Buhaş, *Ne-am cunoscut online...Evoluția relațiilor de cuplu în spațiul virtual [We met online...The evolution of relationships in the virtual space]*, Cluj-Napoca, Eikon, 2015, 199 p.

Concerned with a relatively new field – the sociology of the Internet and of computer mediated interpersonal relations, the writer brings to the attention of those interested a very exciting and under-researched topic in the Romanian sociology – the evolution of romantic relationships developed in the virtual world. “In a constantly moving and evolving world, this type of human relationship is regarded as a normal and natural social process. Moreover, the virtual space is preferred by some people, being described as an effective, comfortable and less expensive way of choosing a partner” (p.60).

The aim of the book is to study romantic relationships initiated online, better say “lasting romantic relationships, those in which the partners reach a high degree of emotional-affective and cognitive involvement” (p.64). Over five chapters, the study presents theoretical approaches on family, the psychosocial determinants of choosing a partner and of computer mediated relationships, as well as two studies, a qualitative and a quantitative one, which manage to deepen the analysis of couple behaviour in the online environment.

After summarising the definitions of family found in the specialist literature and highlighting its fundamental features, the writer focuses on the ways family is discussed from the perspective of symbolic interactionism, of structural functionalism, of systems theory, of the social exchange theory and that of the family life cycle theory. The comparative analysis of the traditional family and of the modern and post-modern family models shows different criteria for choosing a conjugal partner, but also complex changes of family life in the contemporary society. Looking at a European context, the writer presents sociodemographic characteristics of the Romanian family, such as the drop in the age of the first sexual intercourse, the marriage rate (which is above the European average), the increase in the average age of first marriage, the drop in fertility rate and the increase in the average age at which women have their first child.

The theoretical model is further shaped by presenting the most important determinants of partner selection: culture, education, social traditions, physical attractiveness, complementarity, the “Romeo and Juliet” effect, the “hard to conquer” effect, need of affiliation, socio-biological factors. In the writer's opinion, “the process of selecting a partner is, after all, an association between various influence factors” (p.57), in the case of the offline environment the decisive ones being: spatial proximity, socio-cultural, axiological and value similarities, physical attractiveness and biological factors.

At the end of the theoretical exploration the writer presents the sociological and sociopsychological perspectives on computer mediated romantic relationships. Underlining the difference between the the construction/evolution patterns of romantic relationships initiated in the virtual environment and those established in the offline reality, the writer points to the following important influence factors in the online selection of a partner: sociocultural homogamy, physical attractiveness, identity structure and communication style. Using the specialist literature, the writer outlines the socio-demographic profile of the Internet user who looks for online romantic relationships. Thus she observes that women over the age of 40 and people who have university degrees turn more often to this way of establishing relationships. When looking to online interpersonal relations from a positive point of view, the writer mentions the following things: the online lack of inhibition effect, the hyperpersonal communication theory, disclosing the true I and the virtual space as a “playground” theory. The theories that support the negative perspective on relationships developed online are also presented: the social presence theory, the theory of social cues and the theory of media channels. Opting for a positive approach, the writer considers that “the virtual environment can be an extremely dangerous and unsafe world when the users do not take minimum precautionary steps or belong to social groups at risk – children, in particular. But an online interaction that takes place in natural, healthy and socially desirable conditions is likely to result in socialisation that will benefit the users” (p.89).

The qualitative sociological research, conducted by the writer, aims to explore the world of romantic relationships begun in the virtual space and it was carried out by individually interviewing people who have developed such relationships. After presenting the methodological aspects, in the fourth chapter of the book the author outlines a socio-demographic profile of subjects and of partners in romantic relationships, which is followed by the presentation and analysis of the results obtained after interpreting the information gathered. The analysis of the key factors in the initiation and maintenance of an online relationship reveals

the importance of sociocultural, axiological and value similarities in selecting the partner, "the major role of sincere and open communication between the partners" (p.105), but also the valorisation of the affective-emotional support provided by the partner. The analysis of the other thematic dimensions is also very interesting: the dynamics of the romantic relationship from the online environment to the offline environment and the social acceptance of relationships initiated in the virtual space.

The complex and detailed quantitative research represents a significant part of the study, although the writer claims the sample's lack of representativeness due to the relatively small number of subjects. The research limitations are accepted because of the mainly exploratory-descriptive nature of the research. The writer outlines the profile of people who have initiated relationships in the online environment and that of partners in romantic relationships, carries out a comparative analysis of the subjects' opinions about the criteria for selecting a partner and the factual data recorded, presents the characteristics of communication in the online environment, the particularities of romantic relationships developed in the virtual space and the offline dynamics of these relationships.

The novelty and complexity of the issue, the relevance and coherence of the theoretical information, the integrated research method, the thorough analysis of the data are only some of the arguments that recommend this book.

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