Cosmo Girls, Cheetah Boys and Creatures Unlike Any Other: Relationship Advice and Social Change in North America

by

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ABSTRACT

Over the past fifty years, numerous cultural and structural changes have profoundly altered how heterosexual women and men in North America envision and live out their intimate lives. As key social structures where individuals typically sought guidance about their relationships have lost cultural potency, and insecurities about social and economic structures have grown, people have turned increasingly to alternative sources of advice, of which self-help books are a readily available option. In three interrelated studies, this dissertation considers one of North America’s most popular and lucrative book genres—relationship advice—and its readers. On a textual level, it examines connections between ideological shifts in advice and macro-level changes; with regard to audiences, it asks what generates particular modes of self-help reading. All studies then consider the implications of ideological shifts and modes of reading for the creation or maintenance of social boundaries and attendant inequalities.

While prior theoretical and empirical work on relationship advice products and audiences has considered time-limited samples of women’s texts, and research in reception studies has emphasized the importance of gender in generating modes of reading, this dissertation
contributes new insight by looking longitudinally at bestselling advice books, offering the first
detailed look at books for men, and considering the influence of variables beyond gender in
channeling readers toward particular modes of reading. Findings demonstrate strong coupling
between ideological trends in advice and broader social changes, and an interlocking effect of
readers’ biographical, demographic and psychological factors on modes of reading. Analyses of
texts and readers also reveal how the genre reinforces social inequalities. Paper 1 corrects
presumptions about advice book content by identifying new ideological trends, Paper 2 develops
a conceptual and theoretical vocabulary for understanding constructions of ideal masculinity,
namely through identification of a process of “masculinizing intimacy,” and Paper 3 newly
identifies two modes of reading—targeted and habitual—and generates theoretical insight
broadly applicable to reception studies.
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CHAPTER 1

Introduction

In recent years, sociological study has paid increasing attention to culture and intimate relationships. From an initial focus on studying culture as examining highbrow or “legitimate” goods and the consumption thereof, sociologists have come to acknowledge popular and everyday aspects of cultural production and reception as equally important, and the idea of a high/low cultural divide has largely eroded (Mukerji and Schudson, 1991; Williams, 1995). An even more recent development, though now firmly entrenched as an approach to studying culture, is sociology’s growing emphasis on analyzing reception alongside consumer goods and cultural texts themselves (Dines and Humez, 2003; Staiger, 2005). While this current approach to studying culture has been taking root, sociologists have also zeroed in on intimate relationships, most often couching these studies within broader discussions about social change and inequalities. Work in this vein considers how profound structural and cultural changes over the last fifty years—such as women’s increased participation in the labour force, the declining influence of religious institutions and a growing culture of individualism—have altered individuals’ life trajectories and changed family patterns, namely how intimate relationships form, develop and sustain themselves over time (Bauman, 2003; Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 1995, 2004; Bellah et al., 1985; Cherlin, 2009; Giddens, 1992; Gross, 2005; McGee, 2005; Swidler, 2001).

The focus of this dissertation—the self-help industry’s products offering relationship advice, and those who consume them—lies at the heart of where these two vibrant areas of inquiry intersect, thereby offering a compelling reason to explore its enduring and evolving cultural significance. More fundamentally, studying this branch of the self-help industry accomplishes what C. Wright Mills (1959) considered the ultimate goal of sociological inquiry: using the “sociological imagination” to shed light on the relationship between biography (or “personal troubles”) and history (“public issues”). Considering self-help products alongside their consumers enables us to connect the highly personal experience of seeking relationship guidance with macro-level social changes and their impacts. It invites us to consider the broader ramifications and manifestations of social inequalities (re)produced by private, everyday practices like advice reading, and
reminds us that we can use self-help messages as a barometer for gauging cultural changes in ideas about intimacy. This opportunity to consider how the political is made personal through self-help products and reading is the central aim of my research.

Like studies of culture and intimacy, studies of the self-help industry and its products have gained momentum over the past twenty years, fuelled by an awareness of the industry’s enormous success, continued expansion and deep cultural imprint in North America. The industry is worth billions of dollars, and even avoided a sales slump in the midst of the recent global financial downturn; self-help reading materials generated $406 million USD profit in the United States in 2009, and sales are predicted to top $850 million USD annually by 2014 (Linder, 2009; Nielsen BookScan, 2010)[1]. The independent market research publisher Marketdata Enterprises estimates, based on proprietary data obtained from major distributors of self-help products and analyzed in-house, that the entire American self-help market was worth $10.53 billion USD in 2009 (Marketdata Enterprises, 2010).

This continued momentum is a testament to self-help products’ enduring appeal and resonance with North American consumers. As historical analyses of the industry point out (Starker, 1989), self-help is a quintessentially American genre that developed in Protestant New England and promoted self-sufficiency and individualism—qualities that now, as much as then, are key components of the American cultural fabric (Lamont, 1992). Some of America’s wealthiest and most influential media personalities, such as Oprah Winfrey and Dr. Phil McGraw, are at the centre of the self-help consumption nexus; their endorsement of the industry’s array of products further heightens the genre’s appeal.

It is important, at this point, to explain what I mean by a self-help or advice book generally, and a relationship self-help book specifically. A self-help book, regardless of thematic focus, is a prescriptive, instructional, nonfiction product aimed at facilitating self-guided improvement; it

[1] Despite my acknowledgement that social science research must strive to collect and report the most precise data possible, I stress the vexing difficulties associated with obtaining precise and comprehensive sales data on sales of self-help books and related products such as magazines and DVDs. Government bodies (e.g. Statistics Canada) do not collect publicly accessible data on sales of self-help books and related products; rather, data pertaining to the self-help industry is proprietary and sales reports must be purchased for considerable sums. For instance, in 2010 the Florida-based independent market research publisher, Marketdata Enterprises, charged $2,195 USD for a 360-page report titled The U.S. Market for Self-Improvement Products & Services. My research budget did not allow for the acquisition of proprietary datasets, so I have had to rely on the very limited range of sales data that is publicly accessible.
may adopt a conversational tone and offer anecdotes, or may favor an impersonal, clinical approach. The genre is alternately referred to as *self-help*, *advice* and *self-improvement*, and I use the terms interchangeably here. Relationship self-help, specifically, takes as its central concern matters of intimate life—meaning issues pertaining to the formation, maintenance and dissolution of dyadic relationships characterized by emotional and physical/sexual intimacy and romantic and/or sexual feelings and emotional attachments; consequently, the improvements suggested by relationship self-help books are chiefly emotional and relational. While most books of this genre are marketed to adults, some are also marketed to teenagers (though I do not examine books for teenagers here). And although data outlining the extent to which teenagers read adult-focused relationship self-help are not available, it is highly probable that youth read advice texts oriented toward more mature audiences.

Of course, advice on issues central to adjacent genres—namely financial advice and career advice—may figure prominently in a self-help title intended primarily as a relationship advice text; this is because intimate relationships necessarily concern themselves with these neighboring issues and spheres whose impacts are felt in relationships. Likewise, it is possible that relationship self-help’s bordering genres (notably financial, business/career, health and religious/spiritual advice) also include considerable discussion of intimate relationships. In fact, publisher John Wiley & Sons’ executive editor of general interest books suggests that “[t]here is no such thing as pure self-help anymore,” even within a distinct thematic category such as business/career or financial advice; “Self-help is merging with other categories, including humor, health, psychology, spirituality, recovery, and business” (Danford, 2011). This industry expert’s evaluation thus proposes that self-help is a genre in transition, moving toward new hybrid genres. Even though I drew from the *New York Times* and *Publishers Weekly* bestseller book lists when creating my sample for Chapter 2, neither resource offers a definition of the genre. That said, self-help books currently appear on the *New York Times*’ “Paperback Advice & Misc.” list, and on *Publishers Weekly*’s “Hardcover Nonfiction” and Trade Paper” lists (New York Times, 2012; Publishers Weekly, 2012).

The focus of this dissertation is on relationship self-help in book form, but I acknowledge that the genre appears in many other media, notably magazines, newspapers, television and the Internet. (In Chapter 4, readers of self-help books speak to their experiences of consuming the genre in other media.) I argue that both the aims and content of relationship self-help in other
media are comparable to book content, but stress that each medium is governed by its own conventions which impact content (for instance, a syndicated newspaper advice columnist will not be able to cover issues in as much depth as the author of an advice book). Likewise, media have differing degrees of cultural gatekeeping, ranging from minimal in the case of Internet advice content to more extensive in books and magazines. Further, while I concentrate on books it is necessary to be aware of how the self-help industry as a whole actively cross-promotes products and services.

While some things have remained the same about self-help products generally since their American beginnings, and relationship self-help more specifically, much more has changed, particularly in the past half century. Firstly, the advice offered in the products, and the way in which the advice and core topics of discussion are framed, have undergone striking changes; this is particularly true of prescriptions about men and women’s felt needs and desires in intimate relationships. Audiences have also diversified such that married couples—an original target group (see Starker, 1989)—are no longer the self-help industry’s major focus; a growing market for men’s relationship advice is also proving that women, though major consumers of the genre (Simonds, 1992), are not its exclusive audience. While I do not focus on relationship advice materials for gays and lesbians here, they are also turning to the genre more and have increasing access to an array of products that address their specific concerns and challenges, or explain these challenges to their straight friends and family members (Clarke and Rúdólfsdóttir, 2005). And while relationship self-help debuted in North America as a genre by and for Anglo-Saxon Protestants, today’s consumers come from a range of ethnic, religious and cultural backgrounds and occupy a variety of socioeconomic positions. Although at times there is cultural tension between today’s diverse readership and the more mainstream audience often envisioned by self-help’s producers (an issue explored in Chapter 4), contemporary advice materials show more evidence of audiences’ demographic and biographical diversity than those produced decades ago.

The forms in which consumers access self-help have also have also broadened: books are the genre’s oldest medium, and remain a very lucrative segment of the market along with other print media, but the advent of television and Internet content have led to dramatic expansion in the industry and facilitated cross-promotion of self-help products. All of these changes on the production and consumption sides of the relationship advice industry are tied to the broader social context: they reflect and speak to the numerous cultural and structural changes that have
influenced how heterosexual men and women think about and experience their intimate lives. This includes changing economic and political realities that, while perhaps not obviously tied to ideas about and patterns of intimacy, nonetheless enable and constrain intimate arrangements in new ways.

Consequently, central to my dissertation is the argument that sociologists can turn to relationship self-help’s content and reception to illuminate and map out changing gender relations, social structures and ideologies. I also argue that careful analysis of the texts, alongside consumers’ interpretations of texts and their experiences surrounding consumption, helps to identify social inequalities (namely inequalities connected to gender, ethnicity and socioeconomic and immigration statuses) created and/or perpetuated through the products. Granted, textual analysis also reveals some evidence to the contrary: a number of texts, both old and new, promote greater social equality through progressive ideas about gender and attempts to address relationship issues in audiences beyond culturally mainstream groups. Consumers’ commentaries also offer insight into processes of active consumption, demonstrating audiences’ critical evaluations of self-help messages and attempts at resistance (though often limited in their potency).

A fundamental question that emerges from the data, then, is why this ensemble of immensely popular cultural products that people turn to for guidance can actually impede resolution of the problems consumers intend to remedy. What is more, this propensity to harm and confuse is a potential outcome that consumers—albeit to varying degrees—are aware of. Why do men and women of varying ages and backgrounds continue to consume self-help when they know that the activity may be (or definitely is) exacerbating their problems and leaving questions unanswered? I suggest that people continue to consume the genre in spite of its potential to ignore and/or intensify social inequalities because the content of its products, and the functions fulfilled by its consumption, are too complex for us to celebrate relationship self-help as emancipating (e.g. Giddens, 1992; Steinem, 1992: 3-10; Taylor, 1999; Taylor and Van Willingen, 1996: 123) or to criticize it harshly for its power to harm (e.g. Boynton, 2003; Hazleden, 2003, 2004). The complex and difficult nature of relationships, paired with declining support from traditional sources of advice (to which I have already alluded) and growing cultural interest in and reliance on popular psychology’s “scientific” and “expert” approaches to managing intimate lives (Tierney, 2008), also compel readers to continue seeking out the genre.
In terms of content, some texts are progressive on certain issues or in their overall ideological schema, while offering other ideas or framing certain discussions in ways that are strikingly traditional or even regressive. With regard to consumption, even if readers disagree with some of the advice, the way in which it is framed, or how creators of the products choose to foreground and background issues, the self-help experience still fulfils many useful functions. For some consumers, despite its objectionable or traditional elements, it offers an occasion to think through life transitions on a broad level or an opportunity to work at their continuing quest for self-improvement. For others, particularly those who like approaching issues systematically, it provides a way to do so quickly, privately and inexpensively—that faster and often cheaper than would be likely if working with a counselor, therapist or loved one. And for some, its non-equalitarian messages are overpowered by its provision of fun and entertainment, its window into others’ lives, and its comforting suggestion that someone out there “gets” what they are going through. In delineating and theorizing about these patterns in relationship self-help products and consumption, this project improves upon previous understandings of this culture industry and approaches to culture and reception studies more generally.

With regard to reception studies specifically, this project challenges and builds on prior approaches by increasing theoretical amplitude—i.e. expanding the range of cultural objects examined (Griswold, 1987); it does so by identifying modes of reception in a new combination of type of literature (non-fiction advice books) and primary reason for consumption (making practical use of the books’ content). Attention to reception in this pairing of cultural good and intended use also moves us away from sociology’s typical focus on fiction reading and consumption motivated chiefly by readers’ desires for pleasure and escape. Further, it demonstrates the need to pursue a new analytical direction by acknowledging the centrality of gender as a variable impacting modes of reception, but broadening reception research’s usual focus on gender by looking at how gender interacts in combination with other important variables to generate modes of reception. In so doing, it supports Kellner’s assertion (2003: 11-18) that all facets of consumers’ identities “inflect” reception, but some are more influential than others.

On one level, findings advance understandings of reception by demonstrating that the combination of type of book (or cultural product more generally) and primary motive for consumption combine to generate particular modes of reading; on another level, it shows how
Each mode of reading is subsequently underpinned by its own distinct motivation cluster, or set of factors (socio-demographic, biographical and psychological) influencing a given reader’s approach to reading. I stress that this understanding of what leads to different modes of reception, while developed in the context of non-fiction relationship advice reading, should be broadly used to examine how modes of reception are generated in audiences of other varieties of practical non-fiction, namely books about travel, food and cooking, home décor and renovation, and some fashion writing—all of which are tremendously popular genres with heterogeneous audiences.

Additionally, the theoretical ideas I put forth here support and extend the process that Griswold terms “global cultural transfer” (2000): she has argued that audiences in different cultural contexts read a given text differently, so by extension I propose that readers’ modes of reading shift as they migrate. While my interview data in Chapter 4 do not focus on longitudinal trends in readers’ modes of reception, findings point to a strong influence of geographic and cultural displacement on the formation and evolution of how readers read. This opens up an additional realm of inquiry into reception processes which I suspect will become increasingly appealing given the ever more important impact of globalization and migration on cultural goods’ consumption (see Zukin and Maguire, 2004).

THEORETICAL AND METHODOLOGICAL CONTRIBUTIONS

Studies of the self-help industry and of relationship self-help in particular have, to date, been based on temporally limited samples and non-systematic sample creation. They have also focused nearly exclusively on advice to women and the interpretations of women consumers, such that theoretical development coming out of studies largely neglects men as a target audience and considers men, masculinity and intimacy as a subsidiary concern in relation to women’s felt needs and wants. Empirically, knowledge of what men consume, why they consume it and how they interpret the products’ messages also remains extremely underdeveloped. Furthermore, the literature on relationship self-help products and their reception has underemphasized reception processes and developed separately from other studies of cultural reception; this has resulted in
missed opportunities for theoretical and conceptual enrichment through comparisons in modes of reception across genres.

With these salient shortcomings in mind, the research questions guiding my dissertation’s three papers are as follows: 1) What are the ideological trends over time in relationship advice books, particularly concerning the felt relationship needs and wants of women? In light of the persistent ideological tensions found in the books, how can we explain the tensions seen in relationship advice over time?; 2) Which constructions of heterosexual masculinity are promoted in relationship advice books marketed to men? How and why do authors recommend shifts away from models of “traditional” American masculinity that have been criticized for harming individuals and relationships, and how do the constructions and recommendations vary across men’s life course?; 3) What leads to different modes of reception? How can the case of relationship advice reading contribute to understandings of this process across different combinations of genres and audiences? The contributions of this dissertation that come out of these lines of inquiry are outlined below.

Macro-Level Social Change and Change in Relationship Advice

Although the pursuit of advice through self-help is seen as an individual activity aimed at addressing and resolving private issues, and the therapeutic and neoliberal discourses characteristic of the genre promote focus on the individual and the private sphere (Parker, 1996; Rimke, 2000), historical overviews of the genre (Ehrenreich and English, 2005; Starker, 1989) demonstrate strong correlations between macro-level social changes and themes in self-help products. Likewise, consumers of self-help report utilizing products to grapple not just with personal challenges, but also with the impact of broad social changes on intimate life (Simonds, 1992). Research to date thus suggests a need to bring a more wholly sociological (as opposed to social-psychological) perspective to studies of self-help than is typically done. Doing so involves paying greater attention to the political economy in which self-help is produced, which means acknowledging and examining how advice texts are produced in a society characterized by multiple social inequalities, and shifting economic and political realities, that influence the content and reception of cultural products (Dines and Humez, 2003). It also begs inquiry into
linkages between self-help themes and social changes across generations and eras—not just five- or ten-year periods, which have been favoured in research designs.

This research brings together, for the first time, a longitudinal (i.e. multi-decade) approach to mapping relationship self-help trends with an increased focus on social context. Because of the longitudinal focus, it is possible to observe not only periods of progress toward more egalitarian messages, but also periods of backlash during which authors advocate a return to so-called traditional relationship arrangements. Such pendulum effects have not been discussed and theorized in the literature to date, because they are not evident when analysis focuses on a more limited time frame. In Chapter 2, my longitudinal focus enables me to track an unexpected re-traditionalization of articulated needs and wants for women, beginning in the mid-1990s and continuing to the end of my sample’s time frame in 2009. While at the level of texts alone the trend may appear surprising, analyzing the re-traditionalization alongside cultural currents and structural changes—namely the strength of neo-liberal governance and the popularization of post-feminist ideology—offers insight into key influences propelling the shift in the books’ messages.

The longitudinal focus also enables me to posit that self-help culture, while firmly focused on the individual, is simultaneously a space in which the overarching social changes and challenges of an era—and their impacts—are tackled. It also cautions against hasty or oversimplified conclusions about products’ impact on gender relations, whether “good” or “bad” (Boynton, 2003; Giddens, 1992), born out of temporarily limited or non-random samples. It proceeds to illumine the complex, sometimes contradictory character of messages about gender in self-help texts. As discovered in Chapter 2, despite the genre’s recent re-traditionalization in messages about gender and intimacy, the shift is not an absolute one: books do promote some progressive messages alongside their overarching return to tradition. For instance, contemporary advice books encourage so-called egalitarian relationships, but emphasize the need for distinctly feminine and masculine personae within them (amounting to a model of gender equality without gender uniformity); they voice displeasure at the outcomes of the feminist movement and the perceived erosion of family values, promote romance, male leadership and religion/spirituality, but simultaneously celebrate women’s immense freedom to build lives of their own choosing. Thus, while each era displays an ideological cluster in messages about intimacy that veers toward progress or tradition, internal ideological tensions persist—even within texts. What is
visible across these advice book clusters is, in short, dialectical progress in ideas about relationships (see Gramsci, 1978; Hegel, 1812); some traditional ideas about intimacy persist or resurface while new, progressive ones appear, always in slightly new packaging to reflect changes in macro-level social structure and ideology.

**Masculinity, the Life Course and Advice on Gender Identity and Intimacy**

Sociology and cultural studies have treated self-help products—particularly those offering relationship advice—as cultural goods meant primarily or almost exclusively for women. This treatment in the literature ignores data from academic and marketing studies that reveal men’s strong and growing interest in the genre; it also downplays men’s role in creating and consuming self-help products (Lorimer and Barnes, 2005; Nielsen BookScan, 2010). Consequently, very little is known about the content and reception of goods marketed to men, and theoretical development specific to men and self-help is largely undeveloped. This is surprising, given sociology’s growing attention to masculinity/ies and debates surrounding the “crisis of masculinity” (Horrocks, 1994; Kimmel, 2006, 2008; Kimmel and Messner, 2000).

I argue that the study of men’s products requires development of its own theoretical and conceptual vocabulary, even though many theoretical insights from the study of women’s products and of goods beyond the realm of self-help are useful in the analysis of what, how and why men consume. To address this shortcoming, this research offers a first attempt at theory-building about how masculinity is constructed in advice texts, and how it is interpreted and enacted through reception. It does so by developing new concepts for understanding how self-help authors envision so-called “appropriate” heterosexual masculinity across the life course, and explores how masculinity interacts with other variables to influence interpretations of texts. Central here is my theorizing on authors’ strategy of “masculinizing intimacy” by promoting some change in conceptions of ideal manhood through “emotional heroism” and “tempered ambition” while continuing to sell hegemonic ideas about masculinity in intimate relationships.

In Chapter 3, I begin by borrowing an heuristic tool developed in the classic masculinities research of David and Brannon (1976). It proposes that traditional American masculinity consists of four basic rules—No Sissy Stuff, Be a Big Wheel, Be a Sturdy Oak, and Give ’Em Hell—and I thus use it as a means of measuring deviations from core masculine attitudes and
behaviors in authors’ advice to men. In applying it to my analysis of the texts, I propose two new concepts mentioned above for understanding suggested gender strategies that move away from traditional masculinity: “relational heroism” and “tempered ambition.” I also introduce the idea of a process present in men’s books—which I call the strategy of “masculinizing” intimacy—that reframes men’s non-traditional behaviour as manly and enables authors to promote non-traditional behaviour without it seeming effeminate and therefore unattractive. After proposing these new additions to the theoretical and conceptual vocabulary, I again borrow from previous research by interpreting findings using Connell and Messerschmidt’s (2005) concept of compromise formations and Gill’s (no date) concept of interpretive repertoires. These two concepts help to explain why prescriptions for appropriate masculinity vary by age of a book’s target audience, and demonstrate the usefulness of considering trends in advice from a life course perspective. Overall, my new ideas used for textual analysis of men’s books reveal a trend away from traditional masculinity alongside continuing emphasis on gender difference in self-help books’ constructions of masculinity. As with Chapter 2’s findings from women’s books, there are persistent tensions between tradition and change in how authors envision appropriate intimate arrangements.

With regard to masculinity and reception—explored in Chapter 4—as explained above this project recognizes the importance of gender as a variable influencing reception, but pushes research on gender and reception in a new direction by demonstrating how gender combines with other key variables to generate modes of reception. I show that while masculinity tends to channel men toward a targeted mode of self-help reading, a larger cluster of variables including ethnicity, experiences of discrimination and experiences of cultural and geographical upheaval can also act to push men toward habitual reading. There is thus no defining way in which men read relationship advice; processes by which modes of reading are generated involve an interplay of socio-demographic, biographical and psychological factors.

Modes of Active Reception: The Case of Relationship Advice and Links to Broader Consumption Theorizing

As highlighted above, the literature on self-help has developed around the analysis of texts while paying minimal attention to modes of reception and assuming a socio-demographically narrow
It has also paid scant attention to theoretical developments in other branches of media reception studies when considering audiences—a mutually limiting oversight that has inhibited opportunities for broad theory building. Taking two fundamental premises from reception studies—the acknowledgement that all texts are polysemic or "open" to a certain extent, and that audiences’ readings of texts can range from being close to those intended by the creator to negotiated or oppositional (Dines and Humez, 2003: 3-6)—Chapter 4 uses the case of self-help consumption in a context of cultural diversity to examine how modes of reading are generated.

Chapter 4's central argument, the finding discussed above that combination of type of book and primary motive for consumption combine to generate particular modes of reading, and its discovery of two overarching modes of reception (targeted and habitual) in self-help audiences, offer yet another theoretical framework and basic terminology that should be broadly applied to studies of reception in other practical, non-fiction genres. This characterization of reception modes comes out of in-depth interviews with readers in which they explained how and why they consumed the genre, and represents durable (perhaps lifelong) approaches to reception. My discovery of two subsidiary reception modes (talking back and transcoding) in habitual readers—particularly those with multiple minority statuses and experiences of uprooting and discrimination—demonstrates the fruitfulness of bringing a theoretical approach popular in feminist research to studies of reception, namely studying the influence of minority statuses on how readers read texts. This approach offers possibilities for more nuanced understandings of factors influencing reception, without losing sight of gender as a variable of particular interest vis-à-vis relationship advice for heterosexuals.

OVERVIEW OF THE DISSERTATION

This dissertation draws on qualitative data from textual analyses and in-depth, semi-structured interviews, and is organized into five chapters; three substantive chapters are written as independent publishable papers, with a common introductory chapter and concluding chapter. Although the substantive chapters can stand alone as empirical studies and theoretical commentaries, they also speak to one another and should be seen as part of a broader project intended to illuminate three fundamental areas of cultural analysis: context, text and audience reception. While cultural production (of which context is a component) is not a focus here, it is
nonetheless acknowledged throughout this project as having a significant influence on both
cultural goods and their audiences. As other studies of culture industries have demonstrated (e.g.
Becker, 1982; Peterson and Anand, 2004), we cannot ignore the power of cultural gatekeepers
such as editors in shaping textual content and by extension influencing possibilities for reception.

Chapter 2, the first substantive chapter, maps out fifty years of ideological trends in bestselling
advice books’ ideas about women’s perceived needs and wants in relationships. It juxtaposes the
analysis of trends against an historical overview of social changes, and considers the linkages
between text and context. Whereas Chapter 2 looks longitudinally with a focus on women,
Chapter 3 turns to the growing sub-genre of men’s books and examines more recent publications
(from 1995 onward), concentrating on constructions masculinity prescribed by authors. It also
raises the issue of changing prescriptions for gendered behaviour throughout the life course,
paying attention to how constructions of masculinity vary by age of target audience. Here, the
masculinities literature is drawn on for theoretical guidance and insight. After considering text
and context, the dissertation shifts to audience reception in Chapter 4 and considers the complex
ways in which the biographies, socio-demographic profiles and perceived needs and wants of
adult consumers from various walks of life interact to influence their ways of consuming
relationship self-help. This chapter makes a concerted effort to link theoretical insights arising
from the data to opportunities for broader theoretical development in reception studies. Chapter
5 offers a summary of the dissertation’s findings and contributions in furthering understandings
of self-help products, ideas about gender relations and processes of reception; it also provides
commentary on how the three distinct studies presented here speak to and build upon each other.
In closing, it acknowledges limitations of the research, and suggests new lines of inquiry
stemming from the results presented here.

OVERALL GOAL OF THE DISSERTATION

While scholars have demonstrated that ideas about appropriate feminine and masculine
behaviour are transmitted and reinforced through a variety of cultural goods, turning to the case
of relationship advice is particularly instructive given that relationship advice products are
among the most lucrative and widespread cultural products of the past half century, with a
promising future as influential, ubiquitous products. Beyond arguments about the genre’s popularity and durability—and the likelihood that this research will therefore offer an important reference point for scholars looking back on the genre’s development—there are several compelling reasons for carrying out this research and acknowledging its originality.

First, it offers the first combined look at relationship self-help’s context, texts and reception that is both longitudinally focused and that includes equal emphasis on products for men and women. Its longitudinal focus reveals nuance and ideological tensions in messages that would go undetected in shorter sampling frames, and its interest in the growing area of men’s products enables initial theoretical development on masculinities, self-help and the life course. In so doing, these new approaches accomplish a central goal of the dissertation by correcting prior presumptions and arguments about ideological trends; here, I show that the time-limited samples of earlier research led to misinterpretations regarding dynamics of change in advice and content of messages. Consequently, I succeed in increasing and providing more accurate knowledge about ideological trends in advice books. The new theoretical and conceptual vocabulary that this dissertation generates from its look at men and self-help picks up where more descriptive commentaries on masculinity and advice reading have left off (e.g. Kimmel, 2006; Singleton, 2003); this enables us to address why certain themes or processes predominate among men’s books and male audiences, and lays a foundation for future investigations.

The research also offers the first look at minority audiences’ consumption of the genre, consequently expanding understandings of reception in minority groups and drawing attention to the growing issue of cultural dissonance between product and audience. As with the dissertation’s section on masculinities, it offers fresh theoretical insight (discussed above) that can be applied to analyses of various cultural goods and combinations of audience diversity. Yet another original contribution made here is the dissertation’s look at reception in a new combination of texts and consumers: practical non-fiction read by a heterogeneous group of consumers with a predominantly non-pleasure motive for reading. Again, this generates theoretical understandings with very broad applicability. Although prior research on modes of reading has generated excellent knowledge about how reading occurs, this contribution finds something new to add to understandings of reception and should be integrated into all future research on modes of reading.
Though I anticipate that the findings presented here will be of greatest interest to sociologists, producers and distributors of cultural goods such as advice products could stand to learn a lot from the analysis of audience reception provided here, and would be advised to take note of the audience’s diversity and oft-experienced cultural dissonance between products’ prescriptions and their own lived experiences. Tailoring products to better meet the expectations of changing audiences would not only increase industry profits in this case, but also holds the promise of diminishing the exacerbation of social inequalities through products’ more progressive and inclusive messages about intimacy. Such win-win situations are rare. Finally, a project like this accomplishes a goal that lies at the core of sociological inquiry (Mills, 1959): it problematizes and politicizes a highly popular but often hidden and private practice—the consumption of relationship advice—and demonstrates how the personal issue of relationship troubles, including how we conceptualize and seek to resolve them, are shaped in relation to broader social forces.
CHAPTER 2
What a Girl Wants, What a Girl Needs:
Examining Cultural Change and Ideas About Gender Equality in

INTRODUCTION
The Case for Studying Relationship Self-Help

Changes in advice book messages over the past fifty years reflect and speak to the many cultural
and structural changes that have impacted how heterosexual men and women think about and
live out their intimate lives. Sociologists can therefore turn to relationship self-help to illuminate
changing gender relations, social structures and ideologies. As key social structures in North
America (for instance, the church and extended families) where individuals once sought
guidance about their relationships lose cultural potency (Bellah et al., 1985), and insecurities
about social and economic structures—namely our families, our intimate relationships, our jobs
and career trajectories—become increasingly insecure or unclear (McGee, 2005), people are
turning to alternative sources of advice, of which self-help books are a readily available option.
Their accessibility and low cost, along with the privacy they offer readers, suggest that they will
remain a popular source for relationship advice in the coming years (Schudson, 1989; Simonds,
1992; Starker, 1989).

It is also probable that self-help books, by virtue of the excitement and sense of community they
often generate among readers, will retain their status as a top-selling genre (Schudson, 1989;
Simonds, 1992; Starker, 1989). What is more, self-help authors (who are, in many cases, major
media personalities) are what Bourdieu (1984) terms “cultural intermediaries.” They are active
shapers of culture through the advice they dispense and the assessments they make of changes
and trends in intimate life, and set the agenda for talking about contemporary intimacy.
Self-Help Amidst the “Chaos” of Contemporary Love

Though the popularity of self-help literature and relationship advice is widely acknowledged in sociological research (see Carpenter, 2008; Neville, 2007; Whelan, 2004), sociologists disagree about the nature of relationship advice books’ content and their impact on intimate relationships. Most researchers (e.g. Boynton, 2003; Clarke and Rúdólfsdóttir, 2005; Connell and Hunt, 2006; Coontz, 2005; Ericksen, 1999; Hazleden, 2003, 2004; Hochschild, 1994; Illouz, 1997; Jamieson, 1998; Ménard and Kleinplatz, 2008; Peril, 2002, 2006; Siegel, 2000) suggest that advice literature champions conservative, regressive or simply unhelpful approaches to developing and sustaining relationships.

Another—albeit smaller—camp of scholars opposes these views and argues that advice books help men and women expect and achieve more egalitarian relationships. The most frequently cited proponent of the genre, Anthony Giddens, posits that the genre promises to contribute to a “democratization” of heterosexual intimate relationships (1991: 78, 1992). While those who share Giddens’ optimism do not claim that relationship self-help works directly to challenge and change structural arrangements that contribute to the perpetuation of gender inequalities, they propose that the genre offers considerable potential for spurring readers to political protest that can engender democratizing changes in gender relations. As McGee notes, the self-help culture is frequently seen as “a prepolitical form of protest: as individual dissatisfactions that could be channeled toward political participation” (2005: 23). She proceeds to assert that two core ideas on which the self-help genre is premised—self-determination and self-fulfillment—hold political possibilities “that might be tapped for a progressive, even a radical, agenda” (2005: 24). In so doing, she puts forth the idea previously articulated by Taylor (1999: 10) that feminist criticisms of women’s self-help have been “excessively harsh.”

This perception of self-help’s democratizing power to engender political protest and macro-level social change is evident in Steinem’s argument that self-help offers women and men the potential to ignite a “revolution from within,” as the process of self-discovery and awareness of oppression push readers to demand and fight for political change (1992: 10). Further, Steinem proposes that self-help constitutes a tool for political mobilization that even women who are suspicious of activist involvement in group contexts might feel comfortable employing. Self-help’s promotion of revolution from within, says Steinem, succeeds in ending the artificial but
oft-imagined polarization between social activism and self-exploration (1992: 3-10). To Taylor, who examines the role of self-help reading or “bibliotherapy” within the broader context of self-help movements (i.e. collective, politicized efforts wherein individuals with like problems or situations collaborate in obtaining information and offering support), the self-help genre—whether focused on health or relationship concerns—promotes gender equality by offering women broader (meaning socially contextualized) understandings of their problems (1999: 12, 18). Consequently, she credits self-help for confirming women’s shared experiences of oppression rooted in gender, and for illuminating the same linkages between the personal and the political that Steinem discusses (1992: 16). As Taylor points out, some of the most famous and bestselling self-help manuals marketed to women, notably the Boston Women’s Health Book Collective classic, *Our Bodies, Ourselves* (1971), are explicitly feminist and encourage use of self-knowledge to challenge authority and the “expert opinion” often rooted in patriarchal institutions like the medical system (1999: 15-19).

Further, Taylor links self-help with the promotion of gender equality through the genre’s promotion of a feminine “ethic of caring” that offers women and men alike access to an “emotion culture” of open expression (1999: 19-20; Hochschild, 1983: 192-193\(^2\)). (This is an idea to which I will return in Chapter 3, when I will consider the promotion of “emotional heroism” in relationship advice for men.) It can also be claimed that self-help also promotes gender equality—though arguably in a way that benefits neither gender—through what I term a democratization of insecurity: the genre’s increasing efforts at marketing relationship advice to men have ensured that men no longer escape the self-scrutiny that women have long had to put up with when reading about how to live out their intimate lives.

Granted, even this optimistic camp of scholars acknowledges that while self-help promotes gender equality, it tends to overlook social class and ethnicity as compounding contributors to women’s oppression. That said, these scholars praise the genre for criticizing the logic and the practices of social institutions that sustain gender stratification (Taylor, 1999: 24, 26).

\(^2\) Although Hochschild criticizes the genre elsewhere for over-promoting women’s emotional caution and distance in intimate relationships (1994), here she praises the genre for its valorization of an emotion culture that is usually devalued in North America’s “masculinist culture.”
Stepping back from these fundamental debates on self-help and gender equality, we are thus confronted with varying ideas about continuity, change and promotion of gender equality in book content over time, each side putting forth compelling arguments despite the larger body of scholarship asserting that it promotes non-democratizing views about gender relations. This existing body of research invites more in-depth, longitudinal study that identifies changes in the genre’s messages and situates them against a backdrop of macro-level social change in order to address why the shifts have occurred.

The past half-century is of particular sociological interest for the purposes of this research because intimate relationships have altered profoundly during the “late modern era” (see Bauman, 2000, 2003; Beck and Beck-Gernshiem, 2004; Stocks, 2007: 3; Wilson and Stocks, 2004: 72). Couples now marry later, cohabitation has grown in popularity and relationships are becoming more egalitarian in terms of power and resources (Ambert, 2012: 182-215). Increasingly, couples come from mixed ethnic and socioeconomic backgrounds, divorce has lost much of its cultural stigma, and there has been a marked increase in single-parent households and blended families (Coontz, 2005; Gross, 2005). These changes have made love and loving in the late modern era “chaotic,” as couples try to build successful relationships in a culture where several scripts for loving (the traditional, the modern and the postmodern) coexist (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 1995: 86). It also creates a climate ripe for individuals to seek out relationship guidance.

To build on empirical research and theoretical debates about relationship self-help’s evolution during a period of profound social change, I have carried out a content analysis of a sample of bestselling relationship advice books marketed to heterosexual readers and spanning five decades (i.e. 1960s to 2000s). Focusing on change in ideas about the perceived relationship needs and desires of women, and corresponding macro-level changes, I pose an empirical question and an analytical question. On an empirical level, this research asks: *What are the ideological trends over time in relationship advice books?* In light of the persistent ideological tensions found in the books, it proceeds to ask an analytical question: *How can we explain the tensions seen in relationship advice over time?*

What I mean by “explaining” ideological tensions in the books’ messages is that I suggest plausible causes shaping the trends in advice books by pointing to possible reflections of macro-
level structural and cultural circumstances in the texts. Of course, I acknowledge that the books’ authors are the instruments by which cultural values and ideologies make their way into the books, but the end result looks like a reflection of the broader social conditions. My approach thus entails highlighting correspondences between texts and social context, but does not follow a production of culture perspective wherein production systems’ role in shaping symbolic elements of culture are focalized (see Peterson and Anand, 2004: 311). I stress that proving causal links between textual messages and broader social forces is not only beyond the scope of this project, but is also an impossible task.

Three schemata (see DiMaggio, 1997; Lizardo, 2009; Vaisey, 2009)—each one promoting a distinct vision of what women need and want in relationships—are present across the sample’s 50-year span. Findings demonstrate initial emphasis on equal partnerships, sexual experimentation and obliteration of rigid gender roles; I call this schema *Openness and Joy: New frontiers in intimate life*. It is followed by a period of emotional caution, sexual conservatism and pronounced interest in “pathological” relationships in a schema I term *Be Your Own Prince!: Cautionary tales of being burned*. Most recently, books have promoted egalitarian relationships—albeit with distinctly feminine and masculine participants—but voiced displeasure at some outcomes of the feminist movement as well as the perceived erosion of family values; this schema is called *Cheetah Boys and Creatures Unlike Any Other: The return of romance...among equal partners*. Changes demonstrate increasing promotion of neoliberal and post-feminist ideologies in the books, and the emergence of each new schema is facilitated by the broader social context. For the first schema, books’ ideological trends were facilitated by strong momentum in New Social Movements (namely second-wave feminism), women’s increased participation in the labour market, growing interest in alternative lifestyles and increased reproductive choice leading to a sharp drop in fertility levels (notably the legalization of abortion and availability of the birth control pill). For the second schema, key changes promoting its emergence include a period of reactionary neo-liberalism in North America during which fewer gender-sensitive policies were made, the women’s movement’s loss of momentum, and growing acceptance of women’s work as a necessity, not a choice indicating liberal attitudes. Further, the appearance of HIV/AIDS contributed to cultural disapproval of casual sex, and in-vitro fertilization now reduced women’s reliance on men in family formation. Central changes facilitating the shift to the third schema include a North American political climate still
dominated by a shift to the right and conservative policies, widespread promotion of post-feminist ideology and conservative views on the family, the resilience of religious culture—particularly in the U.S.—fuelled the New Christian Right, the Marriage Movement and Covenant Marriages’ promotion of traditional family values.

Thus, each schema coincides with a particular ensemble of macro-level social changes, revealing that the personal is political: Even when books apparently ignore social context, writing about relationships in individualistic terms, they are still shaped by broader social forces. Although three schemata are evident in the advice over time, each one nonetheless demonstrates internal tensions between ideas favouring progress/equality and tradition/inequality in gender relations, and tensions persist across schemata. I suggest that these tensions reflect ongoing debates surrounding the major social changes of each period and of the past half-century more broadly. At the same time, each schema bears the imprint of shifting ideological currents.

DATA AND METHOD

Books’ combination of topic (relationship advice), target audience (heterosexuals, either women or mixed audience), date of first publication (1960-2009), and high sales numbers (i.e. achievement of “bestseller” status in relation to other books released at the same time) were the criteria for inclusion in the sample. The sample was created using a stratified random sampling technique (see Altheide, 1996: 36; Babbie, 2010: 204-206; Henry, 1990); ten books were randomly selected from each decade, and drawn from a master list consisting of all relevant titles found in Publishers Weekly and New York Times bestseller book lists. Exceptionally, only three books published in the 1960s met the criteria for inclusion in the sample; consequently, the total sample size is 43 books. For subsequent decades, the sampling frames were as follows: 1970s—14 titles; 1980s—21 titles; 1990s—24 titles; 2000s—25 titles. The increasing number of

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3 This is consistent with the definition of the relationship self-help genre articulated in Chapter 1. As explained in Chapter 1, neither Publishers Weekly nor the New York Times bestseller book lists provide definitions of the genre.

4 Although this research does not focus on how readers interpret and make use of advice books’ suggestions, I acknowledge their important role in the cultural impact of self-help publications. Seminal studies of self-help culture (e.g. Lichterman, 1992; Simonds, 1992; Taylor, 1996) and women’s reading of romance novels (e.g. Radway, 1984; Puri, 1997) find that readers of fictional and non-fiction relationship literature constitute an “active” audience that is capable of critically evaluating and deriving their own meanings from texts. Readers will be the focus of my future research in this area. Despite this study’s bracketing of readers, I stress the value of studying content both systematically and interpretively to illuminate ideological trends.
relationship self-help titles achieving bestseller status is noteworthy as it backs up claims that the
genre’s popularity was only beginning to gain momentum at the time (see Ehrenreich and
English, 2005: 325-340). Although books of this genre vary considerably in length, they average
approximately 250 pages; the sample thus consists of roughly 10,750 pages of text.

Qualitative content analysis techniques were used to examine the data. The content analysis
centered on themes and frames in the books; themes are theses or ideas that recur in a text (e.g.
the importance of open communication, women’s need for greater independence), and frames are
“super themes” (e.g. emphasis on the relationship with the self) that provide broader focus as to
what is discussed, how it is discussed, and what is not discussed (Altheide, 1996; Stocks et al.,
2007). Together, they inform us about an author’s explicit and implicit messages in a text and
enable a “symptomatic” reading of texts characterized by acknowledging the said and unsaid and
stressing their equal significance (Blackman, 2004; Currie, 1999: 110-111; Pescosolido et al.,
1997). Analysis proceeded in three phases: first, open coding was done whereby categories of
specific topics were created and detailed notes were kept about how topics were discussed.
Initial topic categories were then refined and collapsed during a process of axial coding,
followed by selective coding which involved integrating categories and shifting the focus to the
“big picture” of the data and relationships among salient themes and frames (see Babbie, 2010:
326).

FINDINGS

Schema 1 (1960s and 1970s)

Openness and Joy: New Frontiers in Intimate Life

The sample’s earliest books demonstrate a striking optimism concerning changes in intimate life,
broader social changes and their impact on heterosexual relationships. Authors 1) emphasize
that partners should be seen as equals, 2) endorse exploration of new relationship forms, 3)
promote couples’ investment in ensuring women’s sexual satisfaction, and 4) stress the need for
open and honest communication. Authors also speak excitedly about the women’s movement,
encourage women’s increasing financial independence through labour force involvement, and
speak confidently about the possibility of breaking away from traditional models of dating and marriage and experimenting with tailor-made intimate arrangements. Alex Comfort, author of *The Joy of Sex*, typifies the combination of optimism, belief in gender equality, and desire to build new models of intimate living that are hallmarks of this period’s books:

[F]olklore about sexual identity, institutions, like the monogamous one shot marriage as the norm for all sexual expression, are dying on their feet. People are trying other patterns and have, in fact, more and more choice, economic pressures apart (1972: 9).

He goes on to say that “as to the Women’s Lib bit, nobody can possibly be a good lover—or a whole man—if he doesn’t regard women as (a) people and (b) equals. That is really all there is to be said” (1972: 97).

At their most radical, statements about gender roles from these books propose an obliteration of traditionally “masculine” and “feminine” forms of participation in relationships, and demonstrate considerable discomfort with rigid gender roles. In George and Nena O’Neill’s *Open Marriage* (1972), the couple suggests flexibility and interchangeability of roles, stressing that choice—rather than tradition—must govern decisions concerning who does what domestically and professionally. The O’Neills express this idea eloquently:

Equality in open marriage is a state of mind, supported by respect and consideration for each other’s wishes and needs. Roles can thus be flexible and interchangeable. In open marriage the wife may often cook dinner. In open marriage the husband and wife may often attend parties as a couple. But when they do so, they are doing it out of choice, not because their mate *requires* them to do it. The difference between closed marriage and open marriage is the difference between coercion and choice (O’Neill and O’Neill, 1972: 52).

While women’s involvement in paid work is a focal concern in this cluster, their sexual needs and satisfaction are given greater priority. Authors take for granted that men are almost always gratified in sex, and explain that they are shifting the focus to how women can derive comparable pleasure from intercourse. Women are encouraged to be selfish (Brothers, 1978: 232), to communicate their desires openly and without shame (Carson, 1978: 71), and above all to have fun as they go after sexual gratification (Comfort, 1972, 1973).

Some voices in the schema, however, advocate a contradictory mixture of tradition and change in patterns of intimate living; Helen Gurley Brown (1962), for instance, promotes single women’s sexual experimentation, but suggests maintenance of traditional roles within the framework of
marriage. There is evidence in this group of the emotionally warm yet patriarchal approach to relationships that Hochschild (1994) found characteristic of 1970s self-help books—it shows up in authors’ suggestions that women work on their physical appearance to please their men, without mandating such effort in return; that women seek meaningful paid work but place their husbands’ careers first; and that women make the house a home through extra emotional and aesthetic contributions which cannot be expected to come from their partners. Aside from two titles’ dominant “warm and patriarchal” approaches to relationships, however (Peck, 1961; Morgan, 1973), most of the schema’s advice promotes varying degrees of Giddens’ pure relationship: a partnership with a warm emotional core and support for egalitarian arrangements. Nonetheless, ideological tensions appear even in these titles and suggestions for traditional and progressive approaches to intimate life coexist, sometimes uneasily.

Schema 2: (1980s to mid-1990s)

Be Your Own Prince!: Cautionary Tales of Being Burned

By the early 1980s, there is a marked shift in the advice books’ emphases. Optimism about and interest in exploration through relationships give way to calls for women’s caution and introspection. Books also demonstrate an increasingly myopic view of relationships, focusing on couples or the woman only while backgrounding social context. Five foci are characteristic of this schema: 1) emphasis on the relationship of the self with self, 2) promotion of women’s self-love above all relationship concerns, 3) a vocabulary of dysfunction and pathology for framing relationship challenges, 4) caution to women vis-à-vis emotional investment in relationships, 5) greater sexual conservatism. These foci appear alongside an overarching emphasis on the need for women to be seen and treated as equals, but authors show less confidence in couples’ ability to achieve equal partnerships. Authors suggest that women are enablers in so-called pathological relationships, and that they play a central role in perpetuating inequalities. The burden of rectifying inequalities has shifted from the couple and society to the woman (with the help of her therapist).

Self-help books’ growing focus on deeply examining one’s relationship with self—which Foucault terms the “rapport à soi”—is a hallmark of life in late modernity, a tenet of neoliberal
ideology and has become a central feature of our fixation on individualization and self-improvement (Giddens, 1992; Rimke, 2000). This interest in the “rapport à soi” manifests itself in the second schema in authors’ demands that readers make themselves—not their partners or even their relationships—the focus of their lives. Authors stress that willingness to get to know oneself better is a prerequisite to willingness to fall in love (DeAngelis, 1992; Hendrix, 1992), that a woman without self-acceptance, love and assurance is not ready for a serious relationship (Russianoff, 1982), and that men are “just desserts”—a cherry meant to crown a woman’s already satisfying life (Friedman, 1983). In *The Cinderella Complex*, Colette Dowling informs readers that a prince is not coming to rescue them; women will instead have to be their own princes, filled with self-love instead of waiting to be rescued and validated (1981: 215-216).

Along with insisting that women look after their own needs first, writers during this era use a vocabulary of pathology and dysfunction to describe relationship problems. Women are said to suffer from “love addiction” (Norwood, 1985), to make “foolish choices” (Cowan and Kinder, 1985), and to be deluded by “rescue fantasies” (Dowling, 1981); Robin Norwood’s *Women Who Love Too Much* (1985) borrows Alcoholics Anonymous’ 12-step approach to help women overcome their love addictions.

Instead of radiating optimism and faith in men’s potential to be equal partners, these texts’ messages are filled with emotional caution to women regarding investment in relationships. Authors emphasize that women are often better off alone and must not settle for anything short of a man who treats her as an equal partner. The authors do not, however, instill confidence in readers that such men are plentiful or easy to find. Instead, they tell women to be on the lookout for men’s “fatal flaws” and “compatibility time bombs” (DeAngelis, 1992). Women are to direct most of their emotional energy inward, and to keep it between them and the wall of self-protection they have built up against men. Sexually, too, women are told to be careful: “casual sex is dead” (Kent, 1987: 143), and HIV/AIDS is a growing concern. Women are urged to save sex for committed relationships with men who are certifiably free from sexually transmitted infections (DeAngelis, 1992; Hendrix, 1992). Talk of orgies and sexually open marriages has disappeared completely.

The imperative to love oneself above all and the quest to find a selfless lover coexist uncomfortably in this schema’s messages. Neoliberal ideology—characterized by the promotion of autonomy, self-improvement and self-reliance—also creeps into the books (see Rimke, 2000:}
70-73). Women are asked to be self-conscious, to self-regulate and to take responsibility for their successes and failures in relationships; authors tell them to refocus their energies inward, prioritizing the self in a genre ostensibly about relationships. Because neoliberal ideology is frequently referenced though often left undefined in social science writing—even in the explicit critiques of neoliberalism by Bourdieu (1998) and Giddens (1998)—I wish to clarify here what I mean when I invoke the concept. Contrary to much social science literature in which neoliberalism is used to describe “any tendency deemed to be undesirable” or serve as a “generic term of deprecation” (Thorsen and Lie, no date: 1, 9), I use it here in a more precise manner, in reference to an ensemble of political and ideological beliefs centered around autonomy and personal responsibility within a free market framework. Following Thorsen and Lie, whose definition emerges from a detailed analysis of the term’s development and core tenets, I speak of neoliberalism as

a loosely demarcated set of political beliefs which most prominently and prototypically include the conviction that the only legitimate purpose of the state is to safeguard individual, especially commercial, liberty, as well as strong private property rights. [...] Individuals are also seen as being solely responsible for the consequences of the choices and decisions they freely make: instances of inequality and glaring social injustice are morally acceptable, at least to the degree in which they could be seen as the result of freely made decisions (no date, 14-15).

As with the first schema’s messages, a thread of ideological tension runs through the second schema’s books. Instead of centering around the conflicting promotion of tradition and change in gender relations, though, this schema’s tension involves mixed messages about the importance of closeness versus distance vis-à-vis one’s partner, and about the need to focus on the self versus the other.

Schema 3 (late 1990s to late 2000s):

Cheetah Boys and Creatures Unlike Any Other: The Return of Romance…Among Equal Partners

Another shift in advice book content gains momentum in the mid-1990s. Books from this schema 1) promote so-called egalitarian relationships, but emphasize the need for distinctly
feminine and masculine personae within them (a model of gender equality *without* gender uniformity), 2) voice displeasure at the outcomes of the feminist movement and the perceived erosion of family values, 3) promote romance, a return to chivalry and male leadership, 4) emphasize the importance of God, religion and spirituality in intimate relations. Neo-liberal discourses—namely a focus on women’s self-governance and responsibility for their own action—also intensify in this schema’s titles, and a post-feminist view of gender relations becomes dominant, whereby neo-conservative arguments about gender and sexuality and a focus on individualism are used to claim that equality has been achieved and feminism is no longer needed (see McRobbie, 2009: 8-12).

In typical neoliberal fashion, books from this period continue to bracket broader structural issues impacting intimate relations, and considerable tension is evident between authors’ insistence on men and women’s formal equality and their belief that men and women must have different roles and personae in relationships. As Ellen Fein and Sherrie Schneider stress in *The Rules*,

> We understand why modern, career-oriented women have sometimes scoffed at our suggestions. They’ve been MBA-trained to ‘make things happen’ and to take charge of their careers. However, a relationship with a man is different from a job. In a relationship, the man must take charge. He must propose. We are not making this up—biologically, he’s the aggressor (1995: 9).

The solution, according to the authors, lies in men assuming their “Cheetah Boy” persona—leading, providing, protecting—and women being “Creatures Unlike Any Other”—coy, hard-to-get, nurturing (Fein and Schneider, 1995; McGraw, 2005). As Phil McGraw reasons, “The problem is, the more we attempt to blur roles into a unisex world, the more we are spinning out of control and try to fix ‘what ain’t broke’” (2000: 42).

Many authors resort to biological arguments when explaining women’s intimate needs and wants. Laura Schlessinger (2004) insists that gender roles are natural and that women want to be protected by masculine husbands, but argues that they cannot bring themselves to admit it. John Gray (1995; 1997) explains that the workplace alienates women from their femininity, forcing them to develop “unnatural” and “masculine” traits like aggressiveness; as an antidote to this alienation, he suggests that they use soft, expressive sex and traditional dating rituals (e.g. he opens the car door, he places her order at restaurants) to reconnect with their feminine nature. The so-called problem with fluid roles in relationships, for authors like Gray and Schlessinger, is
rooted in the feminist movement and its aftermath, namely its desire to eliminate gendered
behaviour and kill chivalry. They also blame the concomitant erosion of family values and
spread of “devastating new norms” in North America for contributing to the rise of
“unisexuality” in heterosexual couples (Schlessinger, 2001; 2004).

Schema three’s authors operate on the premise that partners are equals, but object to blurring
traditional gender boundaries. Thus women are asked to respect their partners’ desire to be seen
as the family provider, and women are told to assume his last name upon marrying (Harvey,
2009). These actions and mindsets are encouraged because they show deep respect for him—a
respect that has virtually disappeared in a culture that under-values masculinity in men, and
femininity in women:

Today, feminists are applauding women engaging in stereotypical masculine
misbehaviors: aggression, self-centeredness, abandonment of marriage,
pornography, and promiscuity. More and more women decide they’re entitled to
their happiness no matter the cost to children, families, or society. [This] is a
symptom of a larger problem of this growing selfishness and insensitivity in
general in our culture, and, more frighteningly, in women in specific. When the
gender of nurturance, regeneration, and sensitivity becomes crass and coarse, the
field of hope becomes barren (Schlessinger, 2001: 79-80).

Finally, alongside the promotion of traditionally masculine and feminine behaviour, authors in
this schema emphasize the importance of God, religion and spirituality in intimate life.
Frequently, religious and spiritual discussions are couched within broader discussions that
promote neo-conservative family values and suggest that the aims of feminism are incompatible
with those of family life. Authors of this period emphasize that sex is spiritual, a gift from God
(Gray, 1995); they hope that couples acknowledge God’s presence in their relationship
(McGraw, 2000); they encourage women to question their partner about his religious/spiritual
views and relationship with God (Piver, 2000; Harvey, 2009); they stress that marriage requires
spiritual maturity (Smith, 2006).

The major foci of this schema appear contradictory, but cohere when viewed through the
theoretical lenses of neo-liberalism and post-feminism. The books’ continuing emphasis on the
relationship with oneself, namely through self-regulation and self-empowerment, is
quintessentially neo-liberal (see Rimke, 2000); their conservatism, view of feminism as passé,
belief that gender equality has already been achieved and tendency to avoid discussions about equality are typical of post-feminist discourse (see Coppock et al., 1995; McRobbie, 2009).

Extreme post-feminist discourse also speaks of feminism as “disgusting” or “repulsive” in an attempt to make it sound unpalatable to young women. Schlessinger—and to a lesser extent Gray and Steve Harvey—exemplify this strong post-feminist stance: the women’s rights pendulum has swung too far, they claim, and it is time to get back to basics, namely re-learning how to “back down and just be a lady” (Harvey, 2009: 189). In its softer manifestations, such as Fein and Schneider’s Rules and McGraw’s advice, the message is one of women needing to balance independence and economic power with their desire to love and be loved by a man, all the while embracing their femininity. This is what Angela McRobbie calls “Bridget Jones feminism,” after the book and movie character of the same name: a reassurance that “old-fashioned femininity can be retrieved”—or at least its palatable elements (e.g. sexual freedom and economic independence) (2009: 12).

Rimke argues that self-help literature has always promoted a neoliberal agenda (recall my definition above) insofar as it seeks to mould or produce “citizens who are psychologically ‘healthy’ inasmuch as they are governable […] self-conscious, responsible, self-regulating and self-determined”; she proceeds to say that through the genre’s discourse “individuals are rendered entirely responsible for their failures as well as their successes, their despair as well as their happiness (2000: 63). As with neoliberal policies, self-help prefers to turn its back on structural problems and structural explanations of social problems and instead locate pathology at the level of the individual. This is accomplished either by omitting talk of social problems and their structural roots, or acknowledging yet downplaying the gravity of such problems by emphasizing that the “‘true’ source of humanity’s problems” lies within the self, as does the power to overcome self-imposed limitations (2000: 64-65).

I propose that the long-standing, comfortable fit between relationship self-help and neoliberal discourse became even more tightly coupled toward the end of the twentieth century (i.e. Clusters 2 and 3), as evidenced by books’ increasing focus on the relationship with the self, location of dysfunction and pathology at the individual rather than structural level, and consistent emphasis on self-regulation and self-empowerment.
DISCUSSION

The Dialectic of Cultural Change and Advice Book Content

Major trends in advice book content map onto broader structural and cultural influences on gender equity, as measured by economic, political, technological and social indicators. Thus, a careful study of ideological trends in advice books and the broader social context reveals that the personal is political: While books appear to ignore social context, writing increasingly about relationships in individualistic terms, they are clearly shaped by broader social forces. Three distinct ideological schemata are evident in the advice over time, but each schema also demonstrates internal tensions between ideas favouring progress/equality and tradition/inequality in gender relations. These tensions persist across schemata, and reflect ongoing debates surrounding the major social changes of each period and of the past fifty years in general.

The first schema’s books coincide, arguably, with the period of most profound change for gender relations. Interest in—and public discussion of—alternative lifestyles (namely swinging/comarital sex, group marriages and communes) grew throughout this period (Rubin, 2004). North Americans’ disapproval of premarital sex experienced its sharpest drop of the twentieth century, reaching 37 percent by 1972 (Treas, 2002). Fertility levels dropped sharply as of the 1960s, affording couples more opportunity for fun and sexual experimentation (Pfau-Effinger, 1993; Treas, 2004); this was in part thanks to the Food and Drug Association’s approval of the birth control pill in 1960, and the U.S. Supreme Court’s 1972 decision to make it available to unmarried women (Levy, 2005: 50-54). The following year, the Supreme Court’s Roe v. Wade ruling legalized abortion and increased women’s reproductive freedom (Treas, 2004).

The period was one of intense political activism, with great momentum for many New Social Movements, notably the Vietnam War, civil rights, black power, women’s liberation and gay and lesbian recognition (Allen, 2004; Rubin, 2004). 1970 marked the start of a dramatic increase in cohabitation (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1998), and the turn of the decade heralded profound changes to Canadian and American legal frameworks for divorce with the institution of no-fault legislation (Paetsch et al., 2004). On the labour front, Congress passed the Equal Pay Act (1963), making it illegal to pay men more than women for doing the same job; the Civil Rights
Act was also passed (1964), banning discrimination on the basis of race, sex, and religion and making it illegal for businesses to save specific jobs for men or women or to fire a woman for becoming pregnant. Groundbreaking books about women and gender relations were published, notably *The Feminine Mystique* (1963), *Our Bodies, Ourselves* (1971), and the *Hite Report* (1976) (Levy, 2005: 49-54). It was a time of intense and positive change for women, and the excitement and optimism surrounding the changes are captured in the first schema’s books.

Along with the cooler and more serious tone of the books in schema two, several major developments of the period offered cause for concern; the emotional and sexual caution encouraged in books from this period is understandable in light of these macro-level developments. Politically, North America entered a period of reactionary neo-conservatism marked by economic restraint and a diminished focus on progressive and gender-sensitive social policies (Coleman et al., 2004). This trend is illustrated in a comparative discussion of welfare state retrenchment across Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries since the early 1980s (Clayton and Pontusson, 1998). Here, the authors use social service expenditure data collected by the OECD to demonstrate that the distribution of the United States’ spending on social services diminished from 3.1% to 1.7% of total social spending between 1980 and 1993, and spending on social security transfers shrank from 50.7% to 44.9% during the same period (1998: 90). Concurrently, American income inequality between the highest and lowest 10% of earners grew 35.6% for men and 28.4% for women and the annual average rate of government expenditure growth hovered around 78% of OECD averages between 1979 and 1994 (1998: 72-74, 81). The United States’ public share of health expenditures between 1980 and 1994 rose slightly from 42% to 47%, but remains significantly lower than that of other OECD countries (e.g. the United Kingdom at 89% and 83%, Germany at 75% and 70%, and Sweden at 93% and 87%) (1998: 80). Clayton and Pontusson’s analyses demonstrate comparable—though milder—trends toward decreased public spending and increasing privatization of services in Canada. Together, these central trends point to welfare state retrenchment consistent with Thorsen and Lie’s definition of neoliberalism (no date: 14-15).

But I suggest that we have seen not just a general neoliberalization of North America; intimate relationships, too, have undergone a shift toward neoliberalization—particularly in the United States (Hochschild, 2003: 198-212; Illouz, 2007: 40-73). As Cohen (2012) explains, the current political platforms of leading Republican candidates draw from a mixture of neoliberal and
conservative Christian ideologies about policies touching intimate life (e.g. divorce, birth control, abstinence, abortion). Rather than garnering support from a negligible segment of the American population, Republican presidential candidates Mitt Romney and Rick Santorum—who advocate, among many measures of welfare state retrenchment, a rolling-back of state funding surrounding reproductive rights—receive widespread support from citizens across the country and their appeal spans sociodemographic groups. A similar neoliberalization and retreat from gender egalitarianism in relation to family, gender and sexuality is documented by McRobbie in the discourses of popular TV shows like *What Not to Wear* (2004: 255-256).

Although the period coinciding with Cluster 2 and the beginning of Cluster 3 was marked by major momentum in women’s entry to the American and Canadian into the labour force (OECD, 1996), the women’s movement was losing much of its momentum and questions of employment equity were backgounded (Angel and Angel, 2004: 232-240). Women’s labour force participation was framed, increasingly, as a matter of necessity instead of choice; this is tied to the North American “divorce revolution” with the peaking of the American divorce rate in 1980 and the implementation of no-fault divorce legislation in all U.S. states by the mid-1980s (Amato, 2004: 269). HIV/AIDS appeared in the early 1980s, and was quickly acknowledged as a threat to the heterosexual community; fears surrounding the virus contributed to a rise in North Americans’ disapproval of extramarital sex (Treas, 2004: 398-399). There were, however, medical developments which brought hope and heightened women’s reproductive independence: advances in reproductive technology now enabled in-vitro fertilization and conception from egg donation, further reducing women’s reliance on men in family formation (Richards, 2004: 481-491).

By the mid-1990s, which mark the start of the third book schema, North America’s political climate was still dominated by a general shift to the right and neo-conservative policy development. As a result of the neo-liberal climate, the era was marked by an increase in feelings and experiences of insecurity in people’s private and public lives, fuelled by the growth of precarious employment and the persistence of high divorce rates (McGee, 2005: 120-122). Even in academic writing, conservative views on return to traditional family and relationship patterns enjoyed prominence in some publications; frequently, these arguments suggested that “the 1970s quest for individualism, freedom, and self-fulfillment might have moved too far too fast” (Scanzoni, 2004: 19). Prominent sociologists such as Popenoe—much like advice book
writers Gray and Schlessinger—used neo-functionalist and biological arguments to promote traditional families and lament contemporary “throw-away” attitudes toward intimate relationships (e.g. Popenoe, 1996; 2007). Conservative thinkers used data on the lessening stability of cohabitation (i.e. its diminished role as a precursor to marriage) (Bumpass and Lu, 2000), high divorce rates, and the nearly 1000% increase in cohabitation between 1960 and 1998 (National Marriage Project, 2000; Statistics Canada, 2004; Paetsch et al. 2004) to argue for a return to living in nuclear families and embracing “family values.” Americans reported less positive attitudes toward divorce at the turn of the millennium, as compared with the three previous decades (Amato, 2004: 274), and marriage enjoyed a huge surge in popularity. The Welfare Reform Act of 1996 promoted two-parent families headed by a married couple, and George Bush, Jr. was an enthusiastic supporter of marriage and premarital abstinence in his speeches to Congress (Goldstein, 2002; Levy, 2005: 156).

Support for marriage matched the resilience of religious culture and the “New Christian Right” at the turn of the millennium, particularly in the United States; this included fundamentalists’ reassertion of “what they thought to be the biblical view of marriage, namely the importance of male headship” and rejection of the principle of an egalitarian family—a principle previously rejected at the national Southern Baptist Convention meeting in 1988 (Smith, 2000: 160). Throughout the 1990s, the “Marriage Movement” (including a sizeable contingent of religious leaders) promoted the strengthening of the institution and fought for reforms to state divorce laws; “covenant marriages”—characterized by obligatory premarital counseling and forbidding unilateral no-fault divorce—were introduced in three American states (Amato, 2004: 273). This type of marriage became popular amongst conservative Christians who saw a tight coupling between its legal framework and biblical views on the institution (Sanchez et al., 2001: 192-200). In short, the momentum in Christian Fundamentalist circles generated by Jerry Falwell’s Moral Minority (founded in 1979) has carried into the conservative, anti-feminist discourse of the New Christian Right (Turner, 2004: 298), and most recently into Republican party discourse on family life and family policy (Cohen, 2012).

It is no surprise, under these circumstances, that disapproval of extramarital sex increased in the U.S. at the turn of the millennium (Treas, 2004). Environics Research also documented a comparable shift in Americans’ values between 1992 and 2004, notably a movement toward the “exclusion and intensity” values bundle, including an increase in sexism (Levy, 2005: 210).
Post-feminist ideas and attitudes were embraced by some academics, and became mainstream among the general public (Levy, 2005: 39; McRobbie, 2009). Gallup polling results revealed diminishing support for feminism among American women, with only 25% of them considering themselves feminists by 2001 (Levy, 2005: 86). Sociologists and cultural critics alike stress that pop culture icons and products of the past decade—from Oprah Winfrey to HBO’s *Sex and the City* series and the advice book *He’s Just Not That Into You*—emphasize that young women cannot identify with feminism and merely promote “faux liberation” through the endorsement of “women measuring men’s interest instead of thinking about their own satisfaction” (Budig, 2004; Levy, 2005: 175; McRobbie, 2009).

In making sense of the sample’s tensions between the promotion of progress/equality and tradition/inequality in relationships both within and across its three ideological schema, it is helpful to consider Nena O’Neill’s concept of the *rising spiral* of cultural change and expectations and desires for intimate life. She articulates the idea in the 1984 re-issue of her bestselling book, *Open Marriage*, at a time when—according to her—it had become apparent that the high hopes many people entertained about intimate equality a decade earlier could not be realized. She explains that some traditional ideas (e.g. chivalry) do linger or reappear in more recent prescriptions for intimacy, but are present in an updated form that also acknowledges men and women’s fundamental equality. What is visible across these advice book clusters is, indeed, a dialectical evolution of ideas about relationships; some traditional ideas about intimacy persist or resurface while new, progressive ones appear, always in slightly new packaging to reflect changes in macro-level social structure and ideology. This produces ideological tensions over time and within schema, but an overall message of equality nonetheless dominates.

In making sense of the books’ ideological tensions, it is also helpful to consider Michael Morgenstern’s argument about men’s growing desire for romance with “complete” or liberated women to account for the disappearance and subsequent reemergence of support for traditional gender roles. In an outlying book from the second schema that reads more like a third schema publication, Morgenstern suggests that romance—with its very gendered behavioural scripts—went underground during the peak of feminist activism, then started to reappear after its peak in an updated form that sees women as liberated, “complete” and every bit men’s equals but still eager to be wooed (1982: 5-7). Morgenstern proposes that during its absence women missed romance, but that men missed it even more; his argument about an emerging ideal of gender
equality without uniformity—an ideal that mixes the traditional and the progressive—is supported by the data, particularly in more recent books authored by men eager to bring romance back (e.g. McGraw, 2005; Harvey, 2009).

CONCLUSION

Between the Lines and Beyond the Books

Advice books’ messages about what women need and want in relationships have evolved over the past fifty years in ways that reflect and speak to major cultural and structural changes that have transformed intimate life. The books are, as Starker has demonstrated through an historical overview of various sub-genres (1989), barometers of their cultural climate. What is more, they also demonstrate that the purportedly individualistic relationship concerns of readers are in fact shared concerns that are rooted in macro-level structural changes. The link between the books’ advice and broader structural issues not only applies to trends promoting equality or traditional arrangements—it is also strong in instances of tension and contradiction in relationship advice. Schemata often show contradictions in advice addressing readers’ private problems because the eras in which the advice is given are also filled with mixed messages, differing opinions and a variety of interest groups protecting or promoting diverse gender arrangements.

I suggest that the dialectical nature of advice books’ messages reflects the reality that, even though ostensible progress has been made toward democratization across North America in the past half-century—not just in gender relations, but in the generation of greater participatory possibilities for citizens through new technologies and social movements—when we peek under the hood of North Americans’ intimate lives, we see evidence of persistent inequalities in couples’ divisions of labour, power and possibilities for fulfillment of personal and professional goals (Cairns et al., 2010: 591; Fox, 2009: 306-307; Hochschild, 1989). Still, the extent of self-help authors’ traditional, less egalitarian ideas about intimate life is surprising given that while right-leaning currents in economic and social thought and policy-making have been strong since the 1980s, they by no means lack considerable challenge from the centre- and centre-left.
But while the interconnections between advice for personal problems and broader social changes is made evident by the data, the extent of lag (if any) between social change and reaction to it in relationship advice is more difficult to establish. Do advice gurus’ suggestions lag behind changes, as Coontz (2005: 283) argues, do they appear in print alongside developments, or are they prescient, anticipating changes? While these data offer many instances of lag (for example, Barbara DeAngelis’ talk of the new problem of HIV/AIDS and the need for safe sex in early 1990s titles), and of simultaneity (like Fein and Schneider’s mid-1990s promotion of women’s leadership at work, but not in the bedroom, at a time when women were climbing the corporate ladder but beginning to be exposed to post-feminist discourse that celebrated a return to chivalry), instances of prescience—like that of Morgenstern and romance with “complete” women—are rare. Self-help books thus appear to offer more of a forum for reacting to what is occurring and what has occurred than for predicting and envisioning what will come in the realm of relationships. While it is clear, given the mixture of lag, simultaneity and prescience in books’ messages that using a reflection approach (see Alexander, 2003) to explain book content is far too simplistic, more research will need to be conducted to tease out and theorize about timing in relationships between social changes and discussion thereof in advice literature.

Looking back at the literature on relationship advice, we can see the exaggerated optimism of those who regard advice books role as democratizers of relationships, as well as opposing scholars’ undue negativity. Recent empirical research has challenged Giddens’ thesis that a transformation of intimacy—in which relationship self-help books are helping to steer couples toward fully egalitarian partnerships—is well underway (see Hull et al., 2010: 32-36), and this study’s findings do not demonstrate a uniform trend toward promotion of egalitarian relationships. Likewise, these data reveal a more nuanced—and therefore less pessimistic—picture of relationship advice and promotion of equality than what prior studies have offered, and it is the longitudinal focus of this research that is largely responsible for revealing such nuance, in particular the tensions and contradictions present within and across schema. These nuanced findings suggest that future research on advice trends should employ a similar longitudinal focus so that we can trace the evolution of ideological schemata instead of analyzing a schema in isolation.

With regard to audiences, working with this random sample of bestselling titles has demonstrated that bestselling relationship self-help books of the past half-century are primarily books about
women, focused on perceptions of their needs and wants. Future work will need to consider popular perceptions of men’s needs and wants, as articulated in self-help books for this smaller though growing audience (Singleton, 2003), and to gauge whether comparable shifts to neoliberal and post-feminist ideologies have developed in man-focused publications. And, finally, what is also missing from the puzzle at this stage is readers’ voices. How do the women who have read these books evaluate and utilize the advice? Future research will need to deepen the analysis that has only begun here.
CHAPTER 3
Getting Laid and Finding God: Constructions of Masculinity in Relationship Advice for Heterosexual Men

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, scholars have given considerable attention to ways in which popular cultural goods promote and reinforce beliefs about gender, and thereby contribute to gender inequality. It is thus surprising, given the growth in masculinities scholarship over the past two decades, that more attention has not been paid to men’s relationship advice products. Since women’s self-help products speak to macro-level social changes (McRobbie, 2009; Simonds, 1992) it is expected that men’s products offer comparable insight into how cultural and structural changes have impacted men’s experiences in—and ideas about—intimate relationships with women.

How are men, as romantic partners, expected to change and adjust to broader social changes? What are seen as men’s biggest worries and hurdles vis-à-vis success in intimate relationships? Some researchers have approached men or boys in late adolescence directly to ask about their intimate experiences and expectations as straight guys (Allen, 2007; Gilmartin, 2007; Kimmel, 2008; Redman, 2001), and this work provides valuable snapshots of how they understand and “do” heterosexual masculinity in relationships. Most importantly, these studies provide an overall suggestion that heterosexual men’s romantic activities employ a constraining set of gender beliefs that continues to reinforce traditional gender roles and attendant inequalities.

We now need to take a step back from young men’s accounts to look at a widespread and highly successful cultural product whose discourses about masculinity and heterosexual intimacy influence behavior and ideas in men of various ages. Using a sample of 35 contemporary books aimed at heterosexual men, this research examines which constructions of heterosexual masculinity are promoted in men’s relationship advice books. It then evaluates the extent of recommended shifts away from a hegemonic model of “traditional” American masculinity that has been criticized for harming men and perpetuating gender inequality, and looks to authors for explanations of why they advocate any such shifts. More fundamentally, it questions whether
the proposed shifts constitute an outright departure from hegemonic masculinity, or rather demonstrate what Allen (2007) and Demetriou (2001) term a “reconfiguration” of heterosexual masculine intimacy within hegemonic masculinity. The latter outcome, despite offering a superficial suggestion of progressive change for men and their partners, would involve promotion of a slightly re-made hegemonic masculinity with limited democratizing potential.

My research agenda speaks to current theoretical debates in the areas of gender and culture. To gender scholarship, it addresses the social construction of gender and the dynamics of change and stability in hegemonic masculinity by offering insight into how men’s advice books reinforce gender differences. By theorizing about how the books thereby operate as tools of gender socialization and distinction, the research addresses ongoing questions in culture scholarship about how social boundaries are created and maintained through popular cultural goods. While most research in the sociology of culture has shifted its focus from texts to audiences, and now concentrates on theorizing about consumers’ interpretations and agency, this study reinforces Kellner’s (2003) assertion that texts merit continued attention as contributors to social inequality, and that we must neither romanticize the idea of the active audience nor overemphasize reception and consumers’ agency while downplaying texts’ “political effects” and the social context in which they are produced.

This project also offers multiple additional payoffs for furthering sociological knowledge and theory-building at the intersection of gender and culture. By offering the first in-depth look at men’s relationship self-help messages, it provides the opportunity to develop a new conceptual repertoire for understanding how masculinity is constructed in and promoted through texts. In developing this new approach, I argue for the usefulness of drawing from two concepts employed in the masculinities literature—compromise formations (Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005) and interpretive repertoires (Gill, no date)—to make sense of the authors’ overarching gender strategy. I suggest that compromise formations and interpretive repertoires can both be understood as elements that men can draw from their sets of gender beliefs (Ridgeway and Correll, 2004) to develop strategies of action and thereby solve problems.

To better understand authors’ promotion of subsidiary strategies, I develop two new concepts, relational heroism and tempered ambition. Together with Allan (2007) and Demetriou’s (2001) theorizing on heterosexual intimacy’s departure from versus reconfiguration of masculinity
within hegemonic masculinity, and Ridgeway and Correll’s (2004) perspective on hegemonic gender beliefs and inequality, my conceptual repertoire offers the opportunity to theorize about how we can understand the tensions between tradition and change that are present in men’s advice, why they manifest themselves differently in advice for audiences of different ages, and what the implications of the advice are for hegemonic masculinity and gender inequality.

The “Crisis of Masculinity” and the Four Basic Rules of American Manhood

Analyzing the books’ advice in light of commentaries on men’s so-called “crisis of masculinity” is also central to this project. Most academic and mainstream discussions about the crisis of masculinity are founded on generalizations about the need for change in masculine gender strategies, so this research answers the need for a more specific look at suggested changes by focusing on the concrete, prescriptive discussions of advice book authors.

Many scholars posit that men of varying ages are experiencing a crisis of masculinity (Faludi, 1999; Horrocks, 1994; Jackson, Stevenson and Brooks, 2001; Kimmel, 2006, 2008; Kimmel and Messner, 2000), characterized by feelings of emptiness, loneliness and rage, and self-questioning about identity and life purpose. This line of argument suggests that men’s enactment of traditional masculinity is profoundly damaging, and that masculinity functions as a disguise or “false self,” promoting internalization of emotions and a festering sense of malaise (Horrocks, 1994). Implicit in these discussions is a call for change in the cultural construction of manhood toward something more freeing that measures manliness by men’s integrity and egalitarian character as opposed to their financial situation and professional status.

Discussions about the crisis of masculinity have flourished over the past two decades, but originate in the 1960s (Kimmel, 2006). New Social Movements, such as the civil rights movement and second-wave feminist activism, mounted scathing attacks on traditional masculinity throughout the 1960s and 1970s; men’s liberation movements of the mid-1970s criticized traditional masculinity for being a burden; Betty Friedan spoke of men suffering from an “outmoded masculine mystique” in the 1973 epilogue of her 1963 book, The Feminine Mystique. All suggested that culturally normative constructions of masculinity were lagging behind democratizing changes in men’s and women’s lives (2006: 173-185).
While gender scholarship emphasizes the variety of masculinities lived out by men, and acknowledges the many layers, tensions and contradictions between them, concerns about the crisis of masculinity center on the harmful effects of *traditional masculinity*—a concept referring to the form of masculinity that is culturally normative at present and that men are encouraged, if not outright pressured, to embody (Stibbe, 2004). Although the concept is a contested one, and often appears in the literature under other names such as “dominant” and “hegemonic” masculinity (see Connell, 1995; Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005; Stibbe, 2004: 33), it provides a useful tool for looking at discussions about masculinity in mainstream cultural goods and gauging the extent to which they reinforce or challenge normative masculinity and the crisis of masculinity it is said to fuel.

In this research, I use a widely cited conceptual model of “traditional” American masculinity, developed by David and Brannon (1976), as an heuristic tool for analyzing constructions of masculinity in relationship advice books read by North American men. According to David and Brannon, four basic rules make up the essence of American manhood: **No Sissy Stuff**: Avoid showing any stereotypically feminine characteristics or qualities, such as emotional openness or vulnerability; **Be a Big Wheel**: Aim for wealth, power and success, accumulate status symbols, strive to be looked up to; **Be a Sturdy Oak**: Show a manly air of confidence and toughness, be stoic and self-reliant; **Give ’Em Hell**: Go for it, take risks, be aggressive, conquer (1976: 12-28). As David and Brannon acknowledge, their model describes traditional American masculinity in a pure form, and no man could realistically embody it in every respect. This research thus concerns itself with the degree to which books’ messages promote the model. But since relationship advice books, as prescriptive pop culture texts, are prone to idealism and to essentializing and reifying understandings of gender (Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005: 836, 840), it is not implausible that some might promote a version of masculinity that matches these four rules.

Three principal reasons govern my choice of analytic tool: 1) This research focuses on books popular with a North American audience, so it is appropriate to use a model developed for the same cultural context (David and Brannon, 1976: 12). In this way, the research offers analysis of what Connell and Messerschmidt term a hegemonic masculinity existing at the regional level (2005: 849). 2) Even though the model was created over thirty years ago, it continues to be cited in some of the most influential writing in this area (e.g. Kimmel, 2006, 2008; Kimmel and
Messner, 2000; O’Neil, 2011; Pleck et al., 1993) for its enduring fit with culturally normative masculinity in North America. 3) Consistent with other masculinities literature on traditional and hegemonic masculinity, the model acknowledges the ways in which core dimensions of traditional masculinity harm and oppress men and women, but also recognizes the positive and democratizing potential of a culturally normative form of masculinity.

Thus, my central research aim of determining how relationship advice books construct ideal heterosexual masculinity, paired with the use of David and Brannon’s model as an heuristic tool, suggests focusing on the extent that men are advised to measure up to these enduring rules of American manhood. I stress, however, that my use of the model does not indicate support of the outdated “male sex role” perspective to which David and Brannon contributed. Like Kimmel (1987) and Pleck (1981), I acknowledge the shortcomings of David and Brannon’s writing on the male sex role—namely its often fuzzy distinction between behaviors and social norms and its under-theorized ideas about power—at the same time as I recognize the continued usefulness of their conceptual model in evaluating constructions of masculinity, and the enforcement of hegemonic masculinity, through cultural goods such as self-help books.

DATA AND METHOD

The sample consists of 35 contemporary relationship advice books aimed at a heterosexual male audience. Though some books include sections written for women—usually intended for the man’s significant other—and several authors acknowledge that women may be reading their entire book, all are intended primarily for men. The gender of book authorship is 54% male (single or co-authored), 26% female (single authored), 6% mixed (co-authored), and 14% by a team of three or more authors (with men being in the majority in all cases). Most authors in the sample thus impart advice to readers of the same gender, and speak about the challenges of modern manhood from first-hand experience. While some books contain sections about sexual technique, all are primarily prescriptive texts that focus on men’s intimate relationships as a whole, of which sexual activity is universally acknowledged as an important part. And, although some books focus on dating and developing relationships while others are centered on improving
the quality of long-standing partnerships, all find common ground in their higher valuation of relationships over isolated dating and sexual activity.

I randomly selected books from a master list compiled using thematic searches in the publishing industry resource *Bowker’s Books in Print*, cross-referenced with searches for top sellers of the genre on two major North American bookselling websites (i.e. [www.barnesandnoble.com](http://www.barnesandnoble.com) for the United States and [www.amazon.ca](http://www.amazon.ca) for Canada). As of April, 2010, all titles were available for purchase online by North American customers. The sampling frame consisted of all relevant books published between 1995 and 2009, and coincides with a marked increase in publications of this genre (ABC News, 2010). Consistent with the periodization used in other studies and discussions of the genre (see McRobbie, 2009), it encompasses a period following a completed shift to a distinct cluster of discourses about gender and relationships (namely post-feminist, neo-conservative and concerned with the crisis of masculinity). Books in the sample have an average length of 225 pages, therefore the sample consists of nearly 8,000 pages of text. (See Appendix II for list of books, year of publication and authors.) I was unable to use a time dimension parallel to the sample design in Chapter 2 for this study, and was also unable to focus on bestselling titles. This is because fewer than five books published prior to 1995 qualified as bestsellers, and fewer than fifteen titles published prior to 1995 could have been included overall.

Although relationship advice is available to men through various media, I chose books as a source of data because their authors typically face less rigid content, style and length guidelines than authors of magazine-based advice and Internet advice columns. Books, as a unit of analysis, also contain a considerable amount more text than other common forms of relationship advice, thereby offering authors the opportunity to develop more substantial arguments about appropriate behaviour in heterosexual relationships. Furthermore, books are more enduring sources of advice: whereas Internet advice may only remain posted for days, and magazines often circulate for a few weeks, many of the sample’s books have been re-printed in subsequent editions and placed in library collections, enabling their messages to circulate for longer periods of time. An extensive Canadian study confirmed the relative longevity of books, revealing that 47 percent of bookstore customers purchased recently published books (i.e. titles released in the last three years), while twenty percent of customers purchased books five years old and older (Lorimer and Barnes, 2005: 233). It should also be noted that this research focuses on books, not readers and their interpretations thereof. I acknowledge the important work that has been done
on self-help audiences to date (e.g. Lichterman, 1992; Starker, 1989; Taylor, 1996), and see contributions of this sort as a logical next step for investigating issues of masculinity and the men who read relationship advice books.

I used qualitative analysis techniques to analyze the data, beginning with open coding of book content whereby I developed and subsequently refined categories of topics (see Altheide, 1996; Glaser and Strauss, 1968). After revisiting the data and notes, using David and Brannon’s model as a conceptual guide, salient themes emerged and patterned clusters of ideas became apparent, allowing for the formulation of initial hypotheses and data codes. I then analyzed findings, and further refined hypotheses and codes. The analytic approach was consequently structured, but also allowed for fluidity as I reflected on and reformulated my understandings of the books’ constructions of masculinity.

FINDINGS

Authors push for an overall rejection of traditional masculinity by promoting an overarching strategy of “masculinizing” intimacy, and subsidiary strategies of relational heroism and tempered ambition, that encourage non-traditional behaviour while reframing it as manly. While the overarching strategy promotes a promising departure from the constraints of traditional masculinity by broadening men’s acceptable range of interpretive repertoires (i.e. discourses about masculinity that they can work with as they deploy gender strategies) and compromise formations (i.e. formations of masculinity that help men bridge their contradictory desires or emotions and provide them with a middle ground when weighing different gender strategies), it contributes to continuing emphasis on gender difference by promoting certain hegemonic “gender beliefs” (Ridgeway and Correl, 2004).

This continued promotion of hegemonic beliefs enables a reconfiguration of heterosexual masculine intimacy within hegemonic masculinity, thereby limiting the masculinization strategy’s democratizing potential. Thus, while the books do expand men’s sets of gender beliefs, they still operate within a cultural framework that validates hegemonic masculinity. My finding supports assertions (Demetriou, 2001; Allen, 2007) that the hybridization of masculinities occurs primarily through hegemonic masculinity’s appropriation of new elements,
and that new or progressive enactments of masculinity—such as “romantic masculinity”—do not develop outside hegemonic masculinity but are rather accommodated within it.

Balancing Heart and Spine: Authors’ Selective Rejection of Traditional Masculinity

Contemporary relationship advice books for men promote an overall rejection of traditional masculinity, arguing that it is unhealthy—emotionally and psychologically—both for men and their women partners, exacerbates existing relationship problems, sets a poor example for the next generation of men, and is contrary to Godly or spiritual living. However, authors do not discard facets of traditional masculinity uniformly; they see some as toxic and in need of immediate eradication, but consider others moderately harmful, deserving to be toned down. Authors apply a strategy of relational heroism in their call for men to be demonstrative and propose tempered ambition as a strategy for toning down materialism and risk-taking while remaining solid breadwinners.

“Don’t Stuff It, Man”: No Sissy Stuff and the Sturdy Oak Meet Relational Heroism

Authors are strongest and most unequivocal in their rejection of traditional masculinity’s emotional and attitudinal dimensions, and do so by promoting a strategy of relational heroism. Readers are called on to open up to their partners by acknowledging and displaying their whole range of emotions, to merge emotionally with their partners instead of claiming independence, and to be demonstrative through words and gestures. In David and Brannon’s terms, this amounts to a general rejection of American manhood’s No Sissy Stuff and Sturdy Oak tenets. Twenty-seven of the sample’s books reject this cluster of behaviour, which Wayne Levine summarizes as “stuffing it” (2007: 131), while 2 condone it in limited amounts and 6 accept it uncritically.
In building cases for men’s increased emotional openness, authors agree that it has always been acceptable for men to display emotions that suggest strength, such as anger, frustration, and hostility, but unacceptable to show feelings—like anxiety, fear, love and trust—that suggest vulnerability. They internalize them because of the cultural equation of vulnerability with the feminine, and often face disastrous consequences for doing so. Although self-help literature has been criticized for its myopic fixation on the reader’s needs and its tendency to ignore the structural and cultural root of personal problems (see Rimke, 2000), these authors do acknowledge—albeit through brief and occasional comments—men’s cultural pressure to be stoic and emotionally subdued. Shmuley Boteach assesses the contemporary American man’s emotional dilemma: “Immersed in a society that converted them from humans into machines, they learned how to make money but not how to make love” (2008: 43). Men are pushed to succeed materially, and in doing so make personal sacrifices that cause them to suffer from emotional impoverishment. They are, however, prohibited from voicing the pain that this causes. For the authors, the solution lies in men learning how to be—through intimate emotional expression—and moving beyond cultural scripts for masculinity that have only asked them to do. Authors caution that men who hold back on expressing a full spectrum of emotions in their relationships risk amplifying existing problems with their partner and shortchanging themselves of the experience of being fully human (Schlessinger, 1997: 282; Schwartz, 2005: 72). To Levine, not only does emotional suppression disempower men and keep them from being fully human, but it also prevents them from being real men who know who they are and what they want (2007: 30-31).

Levine is not alone in encouraging men to rethink the meaning of manliness in the realm of emotional expression; Daylle Schwartz also suggests that men can move away from Sturdy Oak stoicism while still feeling and appearing masculine. To her, emotional disclosure is the mark of a real man:

> Behind tough façades are insecure men. Do you think that macho and courage are synonymous? Think again. It takes strength to shed the protection of a macho front and find solutions to emotional problems (2005: 81).

In the same vein, David Deida emphasizes that “losing oneself” through emotional interdependence with one’s partner is not a sissy thing: manly men are happy to lose themselves all the time doing “guy activities” like playing sports and reading newspapers! He argues that
men should thus dare to lose themselves in a similar way—this time emotionally with their partners—without worrying that it compromises their masculinity (1997: 132).

While this book sample is a random one, and no deliberate attempt was made to include books with a religious focus, 14 of the 35 titles make explicit reference to God or spirituality and their importance in men’s relationships. All books that discuss religion or spirituality support a shift toward emotional openness, and argue more forcefully than their secular counterparts for men to express their feelings and admit to vulnerability. These authors invoke God, or a comparable concept of a spiritual guide, by stressing that awareness and expression of one’s emotions brings a man simultaneously closer to God/spiritual truth and to his partner. Together, praying or meditating and communicating openly with a partner creates a win-win situation:

*Build togetherness.* We often get letters and calls from women who are frustrated with their husbands’ lack of spiritual and emotional connection with them. We recommend taking 15 minutes per day maintaining that connection. If you’ll do that—talking, reading the Bible, and praying with your wife—she’ll be more enthusiastic in bed and your relationship will be strengthened (Penner and Penner, 2007: 113; emphasis theirs).

The same authors go on to say that the total openness to God demanded of Christians should be mirrored in intimate relationships:

Spiritually, sex between a husband and wife symbolizes the most important relationship, the one between Christ and His people. Sex reflects the depth of commitment that grows in a relationship. It asks complete abandonment and vulnerability (2007: 125).

Men’s skill in emotional expression is considered a barometer for their spiritual development, and an emotionally closed-off or poisoned relationship is said to violate a man’s “spiritual integrity” (Chia and Abrams, 1996: 216).

In addition to authors’ agreement that men should acknowledge and express a whole range of emotions in relationships, they emphasize that doing so is in no way a sign of sissiness or effeminacy. Being spiritually aware and disciplined is also construed as—if anything—proof of true manliness; this is argued through authors’ equation of spiritual discipline and the traditional association of masculinity with action: “God’s definition of a sissy is someone who hears the Word of God and *doesn’t* do it” (Arterburn and Stoeker, 2000: 77; emphasis theirs). Deida’s
comments on emotional openness and spiritual centeredness exemplify authors’ efforts to recast them as characteristics of manly men:

This book is a guide for a specific kind of newly evolving man. This man is unabashedly masculine [...] sensitive, spontaneous and spiritually alive [...] totally turned on by the feminine [...] but not in some old-style macho fashion. This newly evolving man is not a scared bully posturing like some King Kong in charge of the universe. Nor is he a new age wimp, all spineless, smiley, and starry-eyed (1997: 1).

To Deida, an ideal man strikes a balance of heart and spine; he is emotionally and spiritually open, but far from wimpy:

It is time to move beyond the macho jerk ideal, all spine and no heart. It is also time to evolve beyond the sensitive and caring wimp ideal, all heart and no spine. Heart and spine must be united in a single man (1997: 10-11).

Not all authors, however, find fault with men’s emotional repression. In contrast to most books’ call for men’s full emotional disclosure—particularly the “Finding God” cluster of titles that emphasize the benefits of men’s emotional and spiritual openness—6 books promote selective stoicim and emphasize its importance as a feature of manliness. These titles appear to be marketed to younger and largely single or dating men, as evidenced by textual references to youth, bachelorhood, and a focus on hanging out with guy friends as opposed to discussions of long-term relationships and family commitments.

To Michael Antonio, author of The Exclusive Layguide, self-reliance and the stiff upper lip are men’s necessary allies when trying to establish intimate relationships with women: “Women are very emotional and often cry. But the real man cannot afford to cry like them or whine. He never complains and never looks for someone else to solve his problems” (2007: 22). In a similar publication by an editor of AskMen.com’s online dating advice, men are warned: “Don’t show too much emotion. She’s got enough of her own, and either resents or is sick of her ex-boyfriend’s. Be a rock up front and she’ll want to get her rock on” (Bassil, 2007: 186). In these publications, the Sturdy Oak is condoned in many intimate situations alongside an aggressive approach to “scoring” with women. Together, the books form a contrasting cluster of secular “Getting Laid” advice that ditches talk of opening minds and spirits to offer strategies for spreading legs. Although these “Getting Laid” books profess to help men develop lasting relationships above all, and offer tips for fostering them, they do acknowledge the probability that men’s road to monogamy will be paved with short-term couplings. Not only are the
emotional and attitudinal dimensions of David and Brannon’s rules of American manhood accepted here, they are deemed necessary at times. Communication is considered important “in the sack” (2007: 189), but its value is questioned in other situations. In short, “The real man talks brief and clear. He does not go into unnecessary details” (Antonio, 2007: 22), because guys who do are not true men.

“In Our Specialness We Find Success”: From Being a Big Wheel and Giving ’Em Hell to Tempering Ambition

The majority of advice offered in this sample’s books concerns the emotional and attitudinal dimensions of masculinity in relationships, or men’s experience of being. However, all books also address the action- and achievement-based facets of being a man in an intimate relationship—dimensions of men’s doing. This realm of doing encompasses men’s approaches to dating and establishing relationships with women, the physical dimension of their sexual activity, their economic role in relationships, and the impact of their professional activities on their intimate lives. It also includes the sacrifices men make or risks they take when pursuing goals that impact their personal lives. These aspects of relationships correspond to the dimensions governed by Be a Big Wheel and Give ’Em Hell under traditional masculinity, so a comparison between authors’ advice and David and Brannon’s model is again helpful.

Across the spectrum of books—from those focusing on “Finding God” to those centered on “Getting Laid”—dismissals of men’s need for success, material gain and risk taking are more tempered than authors’ rejections of traditional masculinity’s emotional and attitudinal dimensions. Authors’ reassurances that men can tone down displays of traditional masculinity in the realm of doing while still appearing manly are also less forceful in all but the “Getting Laid” titles. Instead, authors shift the focus of their reassurances from retention of manly image to retention of self-esteem, and offer a strategy of tempered ambition that asks men to move away from fixation on the cultural push toward success, aggression and risk taking while retaining a sense of worth and purpose. Acknowledging a major problem raised in the literature on the crisis of masculinity (see Kimmel, 2006: 220), authors recognize that recent welfare state erosion and the neoliberal political climate are pulling away the structural support that men need to be
“self-made” men. Consequently, authors promote a more social vision of men’s lives, and acknowledge that men’s success rests on more than their efforts.

Authors insist that men—with the help of broader cultural support (which authors acknowledge is not yet fully established)—must redefine success for their gender in less materialistic terms. To Boteach, Donald Trump is the poster boy for traditional masculinity and epitomizes the “broken American male” trapped by “soulless capitalism” (2008: 47); what men need to do is move away from Trump worship and make “[a]n assessment of oneself as a child of G-d [sic] rather than the product of one’s professional exertions” (2008: 280). In the sample’s other spiritually focused books, authors emphasize the role of men’s relationship with God in fostering self-esteem, a more fulfilling intimate life, and a much needed release from the constraints of traditional masculinity.

Titles in the same vein share an ambivalence toward risk-taking and conquest, as well as a repudiation of fixating on material gain. While men are called on to be solid providers for their partners and families (Smalley, 1999: 76), they are also warned not to overinvest in seeking success or acquiring possessions:

> [L]ife wasn’t made to have ‘it all.’ There are times when we must say no. The price is too much. You and your mate may be very capable in what you do, but trying to have everything and be everything to everyone is too big of a price to pay. It may be too big of a risk. […] As men you are the protectors of your family. The trade off of having more money is less family time. Even though the world tells us we can have it all, if you have a transformed mind, you know you can’t (Barnes, 2007: 39).

As for men’s risk-taking and conquest, spiritually focused authors have mixed feelings. Men are called on to “[t]ake a deep breath and take a risk” when pursuing women, because the Bible reminds us that strength lies in quiet confidence (Feldhahn and Rice, 2008: 35-36; emphasis theirs). They are cautioned not to display “stupid ambition” by going after power and acquisition at the expense of intimate relationships (Schlessinger, 1997: 62-62), but also reminded that “[m]en who have lived significant lives are men who never waited: not for money, security, ease, or women” (Deida, 1997: 16).

Opinions are more uniform in the sample’s middle ground (i.e. secular titles that promote a shift away from traditional masculinity and do not focus on sexual conquest). Authors of these books
spend minimal time discussing material gain, and downplay its importance. “Your woman doesn’t necessarily need bells and whistles,” says Eve Salinger, “[s]he just wants to know that her man values her” (2005: xvii). As for risk and conquest, discussions center on sex and men’s need to focus on pleasure over performance and goals (Castleman, 2004: 25; Paget, 2000: 94, 189; Zilbergeld, 1999: xiv, 38). Within the “Getting Laid” cluster, talk of money and possessions figures more prominently than in the sample’s middle ground; men are told that wealth is not everything, but that it certainly matters. The same goes for professional accomplishments, so men might consider exaggerating their achievements when getting to know a date (Stinson, 2008: 98). Clinical psychologist and former Playboy Playmate Victoria Zdrok echoes the advice of the cluster’s other writers, encouraging men to “use some booty to get some booty!” (2008: 208-209). Authors reassure men that they can attract and retain an intimate partner without being wealthy, but are not asked to scorn Trump’s lifestyle. In terms of risk-taking and conquest, support is strong: “Fortune favors the bold” (Fischbarg, 2002: 7-8), so men must not hold back when pursuing women. The dark side of Give ’Em Hell—a side David and Brannon describe as rooted in the need to hurt and conquer (1976: 28)—is even condoned in this cluster, through the promotion of sexual infidelity and strategy of having a “backup woman” in case one’s girlfriend loses her appeal (Bassil, 2007: 43; Fischbarg, 2002: 21).

There is a lesser push in the sample to reject the action- and achievement-based facets of traditional masculinity as compared to its emotional and attitudinal dimensions. While the quest for wealth and power is criticized in religious and spiritually focused books for its tendency to strain intimate relationships and its ungodly obsession with earthly goods, it is seen as acceptable or advantageous in other titles, particularly those focused on dating and sexual aspects of relationships. Through authors’ strategy of tempered ambition, risk and conquest are never rejected outright, but are rather seen as valuable in some situations—typically those that do not cause harm to others.

**DISCUSSION**

Contemporary relationship advice books for men support a selective shift away from some core dimensions of “traditional” or hegemonic masculinity toward an alternative model centered on
emotional openness, reduced focus on material gain and tempered risk taking. Authors propose
two strategies—one of relational heroism, and one of tempered ambition—as means of steering
men toward a revised model of intimate relationships, and put forward an overarching strategy of
“masculinizing” intimacy that promotes non-traditional behaviour while reframing it to readers
as manly. Authors emphasize that their proposed changes let men break free from the rigid
expectations of traditional masculinity without being construed as wimpy, effeminate or gay, and
authors express hope that in so doing they have opened up a space for men that lies between the
cultural stereotypes of Marlboro Man and Wimp. Traditionally, men have had to choose
between those polarities (Schultz, 2000: 392), but these publications invite men to search for a
“balance of heart and spine” (Deida, 1997). In proposing a major shift in constructions of
masculinity, authors address the crisis of masculinity (although they do not acknowledge it by
that name) and consciously attempt to offer alternatives to the “false self” (Horrocks, 1994)
mandated by traditional masculinity.

On the surface, authors’ overarching masculinization strategy and subsidiary strategies appear to
hold democratizing potential for heterosexual intimate relations. They expand men’s sets of
gender beliefs by proposing new ways that men can discover a middle ground—between the
alienating dictates of traditional masculinity and the still unfamiliar/unacceptable territory of
femininity—in which to safely “do” heterosexual masculinity without risk of being construed as
effeminate or gay (i.e. new compromise formations). At the same time, the books’ strategies
give men more latitude in how they can legitimately talk about heterosexual intimacy (i.e. new
interpretive repertoires). One can therefore reasonably expect that, once implemented, the
books’ combined advice about newer, broader ways of talking about and doing heterosexual
intimacy would contribute to reducing gender inequality and lessening the anomic experiences
that have come to characterize intimate relationships in the late modern era (Bauman, 2000;

The books, however, limit their democratizing potential by continuing to draw sharp distinctions
between men and women through their masculinization strategy. This is because, despite the
books’ provision of modified strategies for doing and talking about masculinity, their advice
continues to draw heavily from—and rest on a foundation of—what Ridgeway and Correll
(2004) term “gender beliefs”: hegemonic cultural beliefs about gender, of which David and
Brannon’s four rules of American manhood are an ideal-typical example, that contribute to
perpetuating gender inequality. The insertion of nonhegemonic or “alternative” gender beliefs (2004: 520) into textual messages through new compromise formations and interpretive repertoires is not overcome by the texts’ fundamental construction around hegemonic gender beliefs. This is true of gender beliefs’ hierarchical dimension that “associates men with greater status and instrumental competence,” and its horizontal dimension of “fundamental difference that associates each sex with what the other is not” (2004: 527). While allegedly distancing themselves from the rigid gay/straight and masculine/feminine boundaries drawn by traditional masculinity’s approach to talking about and doing heterosexual intimacy, both “Getting Laid” books that focus on attainment of sex and “Finding God” titles promoting compliance with religious dictates put forth gendered understandings that fetishize or exacerbate differences between men and women and do not encourage men to think of women as similar peers. A masculinization strategy is present at both ends of the spectrum, despite the books’ differing audience demographics and their ideological cleavages in terms of gender beliefs. That said, the extent of support for the masculinization strategy correlates with books’ differing target audiences and respective clusters of gender beliefs.

In “Getting Laid” books, differences of gender and sexual orientation are exacerbated through macho posturing reminiscent of the “lad mag” genre—a variant of young men’s lifestyle writing, typically found in magazines, that focuses on sex and sexual “scoring,” freedom, light topics, and general self-indulgence (Cashmore and Parker, 2003; Dizon, 2004; Edwards, 2003). The genre’s traditional machismo has attracted criticism for its anti-feminism and narcissism (Edwards, 2006; Greer, 2000). In “Finding God” books, by contrast, authors’ views surrounding gender are more in line with the ideological agenda of recent social movements linking heterosexual masculinity, self-discovery and religiosity, namely the Promise Keepers, an American Christian men’s movement centered on “sensitiveness and responsibility” alongside an emphasis on men as fathers in charge (Tepperman and Blain, 2006: 160-163). The model of masculinity promoted here is that of the manly man, but one who is emotionally available, devoutly religious, values family and aims to be a good role model for the next generation. While praised for its push for emotional expression and family support, this ideological cluster has also been criticized for its devaluation of feminist understandings and failure to challenge structural conditions that reinforce male privilege (Heath, 2003; Stacey, 1998).
In both book clusters, the masculinity strategy thus promotes some movement away from the constraints of traditional masculinity; this distancing from traditional masculinity in its purest form, though, does not amount to a complete departure from hegemonic masculinity. Instead, it enables a reconfiguration of heterosexual masculine intimacy within hegemonic masculinity, thereby limiting the strategy’s democratizing potential. Without substantially disrupting hegemonic masculinity, the books’ messages work to expand possibilities for doing and talking about masculinity; they do so while pushing for awareness of—and to varying extents policing of—gender boundaries. Admittedly, the books’ visions of heterosexual intimacy improve on traditional formations characterized by gender inequalities, but they still expect men to be strong and active, to take leadership in their public and private lives, to play the initiator role most often in sexual relations, and to generally demonstrate non-feminine behaviour.

As noted by Allen (2007) and Redman (2001) in their respective studies of young men’s heterosexual romance, displays of romantic affection—despite their appearance of offering men a departure from traditional masculinity and hegemonic scripts—still offer men a set of gender beliefs through which they enact heterosexual masculinity in a way that generally reinforces traditional gender roles. Just as these researchers’ subjects (young “macho” men in Britain and New Zealand) found it necessary to “encase” their telling of romantic exploits to male friends in “hard” masculine language (Redman, 2001: 147), and acknowledged the need to perform a dual self by showing a scruffy side to “mates” while reserving their softer, romantic side for girlfriends, men’s advice books promote a similar approach of exposing a softer masculinity in intimate relations without losing the masculine edge that men derive through hegemonic displays of leadership, competence, and control over their lives. Rogers (2005) also notes a comparable strategy of masculinization in men’s magazine content, albeit achieved through a different process: casting romance and intimacy as manly endeavors by framing them as matters of management and rationalization that move men’s private lives from a state of chaos to one of control. Taken together, this empirical evidence supports Demetriou’s assertion (2001) that the hybridization of masculinities occurs through hegemonic masculinity’s appropriation of new elements (and, in instances such as this one, progressive elements) more so than outright departures from hegemonic masculinity. It also points to the cautious optimism with which we should view men’s advice books and their potential for democratizing heterosexual intimate relations.
With regard to the stronger policing of gender boundaries in books aimed at younger readers, I suggest that younger heterosexual men are presented with a narrower set of gender beliefs for constructing gender strategies because they must first establish their gendered identities—and most importantly, their heterosexuality—before they can comfortably experiment with riskier strategies that do more to challenge traditional masculinity. As evidenced by Allen (2007) and Redman’s (2001) young men in similar cultural contexts, legitimacy as a straight “mate” must be established before one can be taken seriously as a heterosexual guy enacting romantic scripts. In North American culture, where homophobia runs comparably deep and popular cultural goods like advice literature continue to police gender boundaries (see Kimmel, 2006), the early years of one’s intimate career are not an ideal time for experimentation with unconventional behavior. Further, I suggest that men’s recommended compromise formations vary across the life course because certain periods of men’s lives typically bring their own set of goals, uncertainties, challenges and rites of passage (e.g. sexual experimentation, identity formation, and dating in young adulthood, followed by coupling, marriage, fatherhood and possible divorce, separation, re-formation of identity and return to the search for an intimate partner in later life). It is understandable, given the evolving and largely patterned nature of men’s intimate biographies, that advice books for a particular age group would propose a coherent compromise formation, but that this formation would differ from that proposed to readers at a different stage of life. This line of inquiry merits further investigation, and change in books’ recommended compromise formations and use of interpretive repertoires for readers across the life course suggests the need to incorporate these theoretical constructs into life-history research on the dynamics of masculinities.

Returning to the question of the crisis of masculinity, we might ask whether the books’ advice plays a part in improving or exacerbating the feelings of anomie voiced by men in recent years. I suggest that the books’ overarching strategy of masculinization perpetuates men’s feelings of alienation that are at the root of the crisis of masculinity, even though it claims to democratize heterosexual relationships. The strategy demonstrates that the idea that men should not be so masculine remains unmarketable to men in relationship advice, and must therefore be disguised as a way of rethinking masculinity that is still done in contrast to women’s intimate gender strategies. The pervasiveness of this strategy across the books, paired with the immense popularity of the genre and the industry’s expectations for its continued growth, suggests that the
books—as powerful tools of gender socialization and distinction for younger and older readers alike—will prolong rather than speed up men’s efforts at rapprochement with their real and would-be partners. In spite of the expansion of men’s sets of gender beliefs and the growth in men’s responsibilities advocated by authors, particularly in the area of communication and emotional expression, men are only offered a partial opportunity to shed their false selves. While they are called to break away from the restrictions of traditional masculinity, they are not encouraged to radically shift sets of gender beliefs and responsibilities as people in a relationship; they must still be men, and do gender suitably by constantly gauging the appropriateness of their actions and feelings against an evolving model of suggested masculine intimate behaviour. As such, the books support Kimmel’s vision of “democratic manhood”—a new definition of masculinity “that is more about the character of men’s hearts and the depths of their souls than about the size of their biceps, wallets, or penises” (2006: 254)—but stop short of freeing men from thinking in terms of gender difference (and, implicitly, of gender hierarchy) and appropriate gender performance.

Most books in the sample also normalize men’s relationship concerns and problems, meaning that authors situate and explain them within a broader—albeit limited—discussion of social change and the process of men’s socialization (see Kimmel and Fracher, 2005: 148). This is significant and promising, as it offers a departure from the general tendency of self-help material to turn inward and ignore macro-level influences on intimate relations (Rimke, 2000). Instead of being told that they are singlehandedly responsible for their failure or success as an intimate partner, men are reassured that their frustrations are—at least in part—rooted in a culture of unrealistic expectations that continues to breed “broken” American men. Granted, self-help authors’ commentaries do not match the detail or incisive cultural critique offered in sociologists’ accounts of how men’s insecurities and relationship problems are linked with rapidly changing social and economic conditions (e.g. Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2004; Gross, 2005; McGee, 2005).

Finally, while authors recognize self-help books as a private, low-stigma option for men wanting to work through relationship issues (Starker, 1989), authors do not intend that the books’ influence stop at the level of readers’ private lives. Rather, authors suggest that men go public with their struggles and form supportive friendship groups where they can share their journeys with other guys. Whether this happens in a secular or religious context, authors emphasize that it
eases men’s feelings of isolation and gives them the man-to-man support that their women partners cannot provide; it also offers men the opportunity to move beyond their often private and quiet displays of (limited) resistance to traditional masculinity (Gilmartin, 2007). Men are also asked to take what they learn from the books and implement it in their relationships with their sons, thereby inciting change that will snowball to the cultural level. This suggests that the next step for social researchers involves moving from the texts to the readers, and exploring how men read and use the advice they are offered.
CHAPTER 4
Crash Courses and Lifelong Journeys:
Modes of Reading Non-Fiction Advice in a North American Audience

INTRODUCTION

Within the sociology of culture, a substantial literature on media reception has developed in recent decades. Research in this area has investigated a variety of products and audiences and demonstrated how meanings consumers attribute to texts—broadly speaking—vary across time and social space (Dines and Humez, 2003: 3-6). There has been some interest in consumers situated outside of the dominant culture, including minorities by virtue of ethnicity, socio-economic status, citizenship, gender and sexual orientation, generating acknowledgement that interpretive outcomes are contingent on intersections of audience variables—not just demographic, but also social-psychological and biographical (Griswold, 1987b; Kellner 1997, 2003; Lamont, 2000; Shively, 1992; Staiger, 2005).

This work has generated important theoretical insight into ways in which readers in particular respond to texts, most importantly through exploration of how consumers’ socio-demographic profiles and biographies interact to shape their evaluative frameworks for texts. Collectively, the work reveals strong correlations between social location and responses to texts, and suggests that many studies of reception have failed to capture the diversity of reception processes by bracketing some consumers outside of the cultural mainstream. Such bracketing of minority consumers has resulted in missed opportunities to explore how social boundaries and inequalities are both created and maintained through texts.

Despite the aforementioned advances in reception research, most explanations of different groups’ use of cultural products—particularly work on women’s experiences of reading and their embeddedness in interpretive communities (DeVault, 1990; Flynn and Schweickart, 1986: 31-40; Radway, 1984)—emphasize textual interpretation over processes or modes of reading. They also focus overwhelmingly on fiction, and thus on consumers’ reading within a framework motivated chiefly by pleasure. Granted, some fiction readers have claimed to derive information and
practical self-improvement from their reading experiences (Puri, 1997; Radway, 1984), but reading’s role in offering pleasure and escape is typically cited as a primary motive among readers, and has been the dominant analytical focus in sociological study (Badia and Phegley, 2005). We are left wondering about the extent of variety in modes of reading, whether modes of reading link up with particular genres and audiences, and what lies behind differences in modes of reading both within and across genres of cultural products.

Studies of cultural consumption thus need to illuminate and explicate a much broader range of consumption processes and motivations. Given Swidler’s argument (1986) that cultural works function as tools that individuals use to grapple with issues, we need to ask how readers, beyond the usual focus on women and middle-class audiences, make use of books beyond fictional genres and beyond types of books that suggest a predominant pleasure motive for consumption. In response to these outstanding questions, this project brings a genre barely explored in the reception literature—self-help books about relationships—and new varieties of readers—the genre’s heterogeneous audience—into focus. Assuming that modes of reception, like meanings readers attribute to texts, vary by genre and over social space, I ask: What leads to different modes of reception? My central question brings me to address, on one level, how and why modes of reading in the self-help genre differ from modes that predominate in other genres. On another level, it brings me to identify and theorize about different modes of reading in the self-help genre. Common to both levels of analysis is my intent, articulated above, to address a frequent reception oversight by mapping out how social boundaries and inequalities are created and maintained through texts and their consumption.

Following Griswold’s call (1987b) for cultural theory building with increased amplitude (illuminating the biggest range of cultural objects possible), my project expands understandings of modes of reading not only into the self-help/advice genre, but into all genres intended primarily for practical use. This includes non-fiction writing on food, travel, business, home décor and renovation, and some fashion publications. Together, non-fiction advice-based writing occupies a considerable share (roughly 30%) of the non-fiction market in Canada, based on studies done by the Canadian Centre for Studies in Publishing between 1996 and 2000 (the most recent and largest sample of national, non-proprietary data available, which also incorporates findings from Statistics Canada reports and more recent industry opinion) (Lorimer and Barnes, 2005: 220-235). This estimate of market share is comparable to that of the United States.
(National Endowment for the Arts, 2007: 46-51). While I again stress the difficulties associated with obtaining data on self-help book sales, more global book sales data analyzed by the U.S. Census Bureau’s Annual Retail Trade Survey indicate that in 2006, American publishers earned a total of $28.6 billion USD in sales of all genres after returns (National Endowment for the Arts, 2007: 47). In light of these figures, advice book sales clearly generate over a billion dollars annually in North America, and their appeal spans socio-demographic groups, despite the continued dominance of book purchasing and reading among female, university-educated audiences with above average incomes (Lorimer and Barnes, 2005: 222, 230-236). Their broad appeal and ubiquity signal a pressing need for clearer understandings of how they are consumed, and factors shaping consumption styles.

Readers’ Reading and Contextual Influences: Insights from the Sociology of Culture and Reception

Little is known about how readers read self-help—and practical non-fiction more broadly—and ways in which this connects to their motivations for reading a particular genre. Some conceptual development concerning modes of reading has occurred, but it largely concerns modes of reading fiction and tends to cluster outside of sociological research (van Rees and Vipond, 2003). Even in the more popular area of poetic reception, “very few studies” have examined how poetry is read (Hanauer, 2001: 109). In the realm of poetic reception, Hanauer (2001), along with Carminati and colleagues (2006), propose that readers’ strategies for poetic reading—even within sub-genres—are distinct from readers’ approaches to reading other genres. They identify a process whereby readers “habituate” to different poetic styles, and explain that reading begins with the reader deciding what genre the text is, then adapting their reading strategy in accordance with the initial decision. Moser’s research (2007) builds on understandings of poetic reception by proposing that poetic text reception is mediated through communication technologies and cognitive perceptual structures. Miall and Kuiken (2002), based on fiction reading, elaborate a process whereby readers’ interaction of aesthetic and narrative feelings toward a text produce metaphors of personal identification in readers. With regard to the reading of religious texts, Slotten (1977) argues that two principal modes of reading enable readers to get at texts’ hidden meanings: “esoteric” reading by intuiting and divining, and “exoteric” reading by excavation.
Broader theorizing into textual reception is offered by Babon (2006), who emphasizes the role of social context and the “contextual eye” in consumers’ evaluations of cultural objects, and by Kuipers and de Kloet (2009), who identify national “repertoires of evaluation” for reading fiction and argue that these are superseded by global and transnational repertoires that guide readers’ readings.

Simonds (1992) provides the most detailed look at self-help readers’ experiences, albeit with the typical audience focus (white, university-educated women). She finds that readers’ readings are variable, and heavily influenced by their understandings of cultural ideas about identity and selfhood in relationships. As to how and why the women consume, she argues that their reading comes out of a desire to develop the self-identity they feel they lack, and to fill in cultural gaps left by other sources of advice that have lost cultural potency, like organized religion or feminist groups. Noting some overlap with Radway’s romance novel readers, she points out the genres’ shared function as a therapeutic tool for dealing with dissatisfaction in intimate relationships and cultural ideas concerning them. But, comparing their approach to fictional reading, Simonds’ readers explained they were more likely to “subvert the physical authority” of a self-help text (e.g. reading sections out of order) (1992: 47). Salient characteristics of their self-help reading approach included a serious and reflective—more than pleasure-seeking—mindset, and a tendency to pick and choose from among suggestions, engaging critically with advice instead of accepting or rejecting authors’ advice in its entirety. Beyond identifying these core reading approaches, however, Simonds does not build a typology of reading modes; instead, she concentrates on readers’ textual interpretations and emphasizes the individuality thereof. Links between readers’ similar reading approaches and the sample’s relative socio-demographic homogeneity are not explored in depth.

Much like Simonds, Lichterman (1992) finds that self-help operates as a “thin culture”—men and women both read and implement the books’ advice piecemeal, alongside many competing sources of advice. Starker’s look at non-fiction advice reading (1989: 151-167) offers rare insight into gender’s relationship with motivations and ways of reading: he suggests that women read more advice books, do so more frequently, rate their reading experiences as more helpful, and gravitate toward different subject matter (diet, spirituality and health as opposed to sports improvement and home improvement). Again, factors or mechanisms influencing different modes of reading remain untheorized. Furthermore, criteria for advice books’ “helpfulness” are
not explained. Given the sample’s gender differences in modes of reading and the gender gap in readers’ perceptions of books’ helpfulness, an important question arises: Do definitions and evaluations of a book’s quality form part of a particular mode of reading, or do modes of reading in turn generate cultural evaluation schemes?

As I bring my overarching question of what generates particular modes of reading to the study of a largely unexplored genre and its heterogeneous audience, I am informed by the insights above and some recent turns in broader reception research. In particular, I approach this research from the multiperspectival approach that has gained ground in studies of culture. Scholarship in this vein pays attention to combinations of variables—not as additive, but as interactive—and their impact on reception. According to this standpoint, which comes out of earlier theorizing on social inequalities, all facets of readers’ identities “inflect” reception, though some more influentially than others (Kellner, 2003: 16-18). Exemplary research of this kind includes exploration of how nationality, religion and political ideology interact to influence responses to a popular soap opera (Liebes and Katz, 1990) and a documentary film (Thouard, 2001), and the complex effect of age, gender and social class on evaluations of TV characters and plots (Press 1990, 1991). Though reception research shows that gender is a variable of great interest, I look at gender’s strong influence within a broader web of factors influencing modes of reading.

My analysis is also framed by Griswold’s theorizing on “global cultural transfer” (2000)—the process whereby a book or literary genre is “transported and reconstructed” in another society. If books and genres generate different meanings as they move across cultural contexts, it is reasonable to hypothesize that readers’ modes of reading books and genres also shift as they migrate. This, paired with Griswold’s assertion (1993) that life experience is the biggest factor impacting how readers read, suggests the need for focus on how modes of reading shift across the life course (for an example of this approach, see Riggs, 1996, 1998). Finally, while this research into a new genre and audience combination offers the likelihood of revealing new modes of reading and revealing additional mechanisms behind them, it also provides an opportunity to deepen theoretical understandings of two consumption modes already identified among heterogeneous and minority audiences: talking back and transcoding. Stewart (2003) suggests that minorities’ resistance to messages and images in texts can be understood as a process of “talking back” to a cultural work within a larger project of resisting dominant ideologies and portrayals (see also hooks, 1989). Whereas the idea of resistance is central to
talking back, reworking is fundamental to transcoding—a process whereby audiences translate what they have consumed, which usually includes central ideologies and/or myths of the dominant culture, and reinterpret it through a politicized, culturally conscious perspective (Everett, 2000; Staiger, 2005; see also Shively, 1992, for discussion of a comparable process).

My interest in resistance to textual messages brings the analysis back to its overarching concern about social inequality and boundaries. Paying attention to processes of resistance enables us to discover which social boundaries, in readers’ opinions (particularly those of minority readers), are constructed and maintained through advice literature. By extension, it offers the opportunity to determine whether minority readers’ articulated awareness of boundary creation or maintenance and resulting social inequalities differs from that of audience members from the dominant culture, and how this in turn impacts readers’ consumption experiences.

RESEARCH DESIGN

This research concerns itself with the “talking life” of relationship self-help—that is, the thinking, interpretation, discussion and action that follows and surrounds written advice and its consumption, rather than the texts themselves (Lamb, 2005). It is set in Toronto, Canada because its diversity enables optimal application of approaches in the study of reception to the city’s self-help audience. Not only is Toronto affluent, and one of North America’s largest cities—making it a major consumption centre for cultural goods of many sorts—it has also been recognized as of the world’s most diverse cities (United Nations, 2004). According to 2006 Census data, 49.9% of Toronto’s population was foreign born, and 46.9% of residents were visible minorities (Statistics Canada, 2007); Toronto’s diversity thus exceeds that of Los

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5 It should be noted that, while the focus of the research is overwhelmingly about the consumption of written material, some participants mentioned consuming relationship advice by listening to or watching it (i.e. on television, in audio books, on the radio and via podcast). For this reason, the discussion of findings and the theoretical ideas underpinning the discussion centre on written self-help, but participants’ occasional listening and watching experiences are also considered.

6 Visible minority is a standard demographic term used by Statistics Canada to identify individuals of minority ethnic groups. In accordance with Canada’s Employment Equity Act, Statistics Canada defines visible minorities as “persons, other than Aboriginal peoples, who are non-Caucasian in race or non-white in colour.” The visible minority population consists mainly of the following groups: Chinese, South Asian, Black, Arab, West Asian, Filipino, Southeast Asian, Latin American, Japanese and Korean (Statistics Canada, 2011).
Angeles, Miami and New York City, which are commonly referenced and studied as major and diverse sites of cultural consumption.

Data consist of 36 interviews with past and present consumers of relationship self-help, all of whom self-identify as heterosexual, are at least 20 years of age and live and/or work in the Greater Toronto Area. I included all participants who met these criteria in the sample, and with the exception of one married couple that I interviewed in tandem, no participants acknowledged knowing another participant and no snowball sampling was carried out. (An additional 5 participants shared limited information about their experiences via phone and e-mail, but were unable to fully participate in the research due to schedule constraints; consequently, they are not included in the sample.) I recruited participants through advertisements posted at a wide variety of locations within a 5 Km (3.1 mile) radius of the downtown core, namely coffeeshops, libraries, transit stations, entertainment venues, grocery stores and marketplaces. I carried out in-depth, semi-structured, in-person interviews with participants on a one-on-one basis between January and June 2011 in Toronto. Interviews lasted an average of 75 minutes each, resulting in 50 hours of interview data. While conversations centered around readers’ experiences with advice about intimate relationships, one third of participants also drew from their reading of self-help about interpersonal relationships in general.

I analyzed interview transcripts using qualitative content analysis techniques. Analysis began with open data coding, a phase during which categories and concepts were identified and labeled; this was followed by axial coding—in-depth analysis of categories—and finally selective coding, a phase wherein categories were collapsed or revised and analysis concentrated on the strongest relationships between categories (see Babbie and Benaquisto, 2010: 326; Bryman et al., 2009: 300). I carried out this analysis alongside coding and analysis of patterns in participants’ demographic profiles (a table outlining participants’ basic demographic information is included in Appendix A), and used a coding schedule to manage all data (see Bryman et al., 2009: 298). I directed attention at manifest and latent content through an interpretive approach.

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7 Participants received a very small token of thanks for their participation, i.e. the researcher covered the cost of light refreshments during some interviews. This is not thought to have influenced individuals’ decision to participate, and received prior ethics approval from the research institution.

8 Two participants also followed up their interviews with lengthy e-mail correspondence in which they elaborated on issues raised in the face-to-face discussion. This correspondence was analyzed alongside the interview transcripts and factors into the discussion of research results.
emphasizing understandings of participants’ discussions from their own point of view. Overall, the approach to data analysis enabled attention to detail within the data, as well as awareness of the broader picture of participants’ everyday lives and the broader social context in which they read advice about relationships.

FINDINGS

Conversations with readers of relationship self-help about their reading and its place in their broader lives demonstrate how the combination of type of book and motives for reading generate a particular mode of reading. Among the readers interrogated here, non-fiction advice on the subject of relationships comes together with readers’ motivation clusters to produce one of two overarching modes of reading, which I will call targeted consumption and habitual consumption. Each mode is underpinned by its own distinct motivation cluster, or set of factors influencing a given reader’s approach to reading. These motivation clusters are comprised of socio-demographic variables, biographical triggers and perceived needs and desires, and while some overlap exists across the two clusters, they are nonetheless different in the nature and influence of their components. Gender appears to be the most powerful variable in channeling readers toward a particular mode, but always in conjunction with other factors.

Running alongside the two overarching modes of reading are two subsidiary and less prevalent modes of consumption already detected in reception studies: talking back and transcoding. These subsidiary modes, when present, exist exclusively among habitual readers, because habitual reading’s motivation cluster—namely readers’ multiple minority statuses, multiple life transitions and feelings of stigma—is more apt to encourage readers’ resistance to and reworking of the books’ messages. Readers who resist textual messages by talking back and transcoding also articulate an awareness of how the genre creates and maintains social boundaries by catering book content to the preferences and resources of dominant social groups. By contrast, non-minority readers do not raise the issue of social boundaries when discussing their reading experiences.
A Heterogeneous Audience

A wide variety of respondents participated in the study, and their demographic diversity in many ways parallels the diversity of the research context. The sample’s percentage of visible minority respondents (42%) and respondents born outside of Canada (50%) come close to averages within the research context’s population (Statistics Canada, 2007). While women are slightly overrepresented (58%) compared to the general population, they do not dominate the sample in the way that previous studies would lead us to expect. Single people are overrepresented in the sample (56%), as are younger readers in their 20s and 30s (75%). The correlation between these overrepresented characteristics is likely explained by the fact that the majority of Canadians in their 20s report being single (Statistics Canada, 2007), and it could be expected that singlehood acts as a strong motivator in seeking out relationship advice.

The overrepresented groups could skew findings due to single and younger readers’ frequent preoccupation with a different set of relationship challenges and milestones (e.g. they often favour dating over (re)marriage and divorce as foci in books), and that could in turn impact their approaches to reading. Nonetheless, I suspect that their predominance in the sample is representative of single and young readers’ greater interest in the genre as compared to older and/or attached readers, who are more likely to be settled and may thus have less desire to turn to relationship advice. Ultimately, I suggest that the strong presence of young readers in the sample is an advantage because it showcases a segment of the self-help audience during a period of cultural formation: these young readers have not yet formed all of their ideas about relationships and advice-seeking, or ideas about the related domains of gender roles, family formation and career. Paying attention to young readers offers insight into the solidification of what will likely be durable habits of thought and evaluation.

Another dimension in which the sample diverges from its research context is in educational attainment: 92% of participants reported that they have completed—or are nearing completion of—a college diploma or university degree. Again, this could influence results through educated readers’ tendency to read in particular ways (for instance, analytically) or to favour certain types of advice books (e.g. those written by credentialed “expert” authors). While I have kept this in mind in interpreting my findings, I also stress that the education bias in the sample is similar to that found in other studies of self-help reading and leisure reading of other genres.
Respondents reported a variety of economic situations, with some earning comfortably and others struggling to make ends meet. Despite their educational credentials, six respondents (17%) reported present or past difficulties in obtaining employment related to their training, often due to recent immigration. Despite their variety of backgrounds and life experiences, all readers come out of what I call a “reading culture”: when I asked them about the role that reading of all sorts has played throughout their lives, each respondent spoke to the importance that reading has held in their childhoods and adult lives, in leisure and/or professional contexts. Consequently, it is important to keep in mind that while the consumers interrogated here enjoy reading relationship advice from books—and most (81%) also consume it in other forms, notably on the Internet and in magazines—there is a broader base of advice readership not captured here who consume relationship advice exclusively in non-book forms. While I can only hypothesize about the role that reading has played in these other readers’ lives, it is very possible that fewer of these readers come out of what I term a reading culture, and that this in turn generates different reading motives and modes.

“It’s Like Taking a University Course”: Advice Reading and the Targeted Consumer

Of all readers interviewed, 15 (42%) approach advice reading as targeted consumers. An additional 3 readers, while predominantly habitual in their consumption, nonetheless exhibit some strong targeted characteristics. The targeted mode of reading is the more pragmatically oriented of the two overarching modes, and represents the approach that—given self-help’s intent as a practical tool—we might most expect to see among advice readers. Amongst this group of readers, the combination of a practical type of book and a motivation cluster characterized by a serious, goal-oriented mindset and acute biographical triggers generates a highly pragmatic way of approaching relationship advice.

Targeted consumption involves turning to self-help material intensively and for a limited time, as the result of a distinct event or chain of events that is acute and triggers the reader to seek guidance. Typically, the biographical trigger involves the dissolution or threat of dissolution of a long-term relationship, or a major argument with the reader’s significant other. Targeted reading
is marked by a very methodical reading style, often accompanied by note-taking or doing exercises prescribed by authors in the texts. Those who engage in targeted reading report doing it with serious intent—to learn about and to resolve an issue, not to have fun (though a minority of readers acknowledge moments when the books provided entertainment).

Readers who follow this approach cease to read advice material once the problem is resolved or somehow ends, and emphasize that books offer them the most “serious” and “in-depth” advice of all self-help media. Targeted consumption thus frequently involves reading books cover-to-cover, but also includes focused and in-depth reading of related Internet content located after Googling specific terms or questions. These consumers explain that they generally eschew advice content in magazines, given that it is “light” or “fluffy” and not suited to offering them the precise and detailed suggestions they seek. Self-help reading is not a lifestyle or part of a long-term journey for these readers; rather, it is an instrumental means to an end.

That is not to say, however, that feelings do not factor into the targeted reader’s motivational cluster. Targeted readers do express emotionally rooted needs and wants, particularly 1) a craving for direction and a clear roadmap to clear up feelings of confusion about their romantic lives; 2) a pronounced need to address an acute feeling of panic (as opposed to prolonged frustration) and looming fear linked to the relationship challenge in question; 3) a strong desire for privacy—even secrecy—when consulting relationship advice, often arising from embarrassment surrounding the choice to seek out self-help. When describing their personalities, they stress a tendency to be methodical, to pay great attention to detail, and to be results-driven.

Targeted consumers express little interest in seeking outside help from friends and family, counselors, psychologists or psychiatrists, and the few targeted consumers (3, i.e. 15%) who have pursued professional advice only did it for a short term; they cite instrumental reasons (i.e. fixing the perceived problem) for doing so rather than the mixture of instrumental and exploratory reasons that motivate habitual consumers to seek professional guidance. And although most participants explained that they grew up in a home environment that emphasized reading, targeted consumers are less likely than their habitual counterparts (33% vs. 62%) to stress that reading currently plays a big part in their overall lifestyle.

Targeted readers tend to be male (73%), non-visible minority (66%) and Canadian-born (66%); very few (7%) report struggles securing employment. The typical targeted reader is thus a
member of several dominant social groups, and reads relationship advice during periods when they see their relationship challenges are their central life struggle. While these readers’ lives are by no means free of other problems and sources of stress, they do not come to their reading to deal with a relationship issue compounded by such experiences as ethnic discrimination, difficulty in securing employment, or feelings of being an outsider in a new cultural milieu. Targeted readers’ socio-demographic profiles and life circumstances amount to a position of cumulative advantage, and thereby channel their reading in a pragmatic direction with a well-defined and relatively narrow objective: solving perceived relationship problems and quickly getting on with life. They do not tend to experience their minority statuses, if any, as sources of stigma or discrimination that compound their relationship challenges over long periods of time and contribute to more exploratory and soul-searching modes of reading relationship advice. While findings suggest that gender is a core factor at play here, it never operates by itself to steer readers toward the targeted mode.

Bruce, a musician and teacher in his mid-40s, offers an ideal-typical example of targeted consumption. He turned to self-help books for a brief episode several years ago when he and his partner acknowledged deep problems in their relationship. Sensing that a breakup was probable if they did not work through their issues, they decided to seek advice from books alongside seeing a counselor:

> We actually went to a bookstore together and just, you know, looked at a whole bunch of them and picked out—I think two or three—and, you know, we picked out the ones that were interesting to each person individually. And then we swapped.

Seeking out self-help was a mutual decision between him and his long-term partner, and he read the material meticulously with serious, goal-oriented intent. Bruce noted:

> I’d say the books in general were helpful. We actually did some of the exercises that were suggested in the books. Like, we took the books seriously and we were pretty open-minded to what they said for the most part. And, you know, we read them pretty much all the way through.

As with others who practice targeted reading, Bruce says that one of his top criteria for self-help materials is “getting some exercises to do.” While he does acknowledge that he found John Gray’s *Men Are From Mars, Women Are From Venus* “entertaining,” he says that the main
The reason why he likes it is that it addresses “core issues” thoroughly and in a way that he can relate to.

Like other targeted readers, Bruce identified his relationship as the problem in his life at the time he turned to self-help books—it was uncomplicated by other experiences of stress, discrimination or stigma. During Bruce’s period of intense reading, he was gainfully employed; as a white, Canadian-born man he referenced no experiences of discrimination or exclusion connected to his career or personal development. What pushed him to seek out the advice was the combination of an acute biographical trigger—a crisis point in his long-term relationship—and what he believed he needed and wanted out of the reading experience. For him, those needs and wants amounted to direction in the form of a clear roadmap, concrete goals to strengthen the relationship, an efficient plan that nonetheless offered more than a superficial “Bandaid solution,” and reassurance in the face of his looming fear of loss from the relationship. Bruce emphasized that in his state, he was looking for advice that was clear and prescriptive without “going for the jugular” and addressing painful issues too directly. Bruce was discrete about his relationship problems, restricting discussions about them to his partner, their counselor and a circle of close friends, but he did not feel he needed total secrecy. As a typical targeted consumer, Bruce did not use self-help reading as an opportunity for community building or an attempt to de-marginalize himself by connecting with others.

Ken, a 20-year old exchange student from China, demonstrates a clear case of targeted consumption, albeit not the ideal-typical case exhibited by Bruce. He turned to relationship advice when he found himself attracted to a fellow Chinese exchange student and contemplated breaking up with his long-term girlfriend back home. Like most participants who do targeted reading, he had no prior exposure to the genre and sought it out to work through a specific life event. His focus on books and methodical approach to reading are typical, and he stresses that his use of the literature is a one-time event:

I didn’t try this kind of stuff before that [his brief fling with the exchange student]. I knew I should follow my own feelings, right. But because I failed, miserably, I thought I should reconsider [consulting] this kind of stuff.

Although he acknowledged that he would turn to relationship advice again if a similar crisis arose, he does not intend to become a regular or recreational reader of the genre. To him, consulting self-help in books and online is akin to taking a university course:
If I’m going to read or watch something, I will be serious and take notes just like attending a lecture. [...] It’s like taking a university course. Yeah, there’s the lecture, there’s the PDF, there are outlines, there are questions you have to ask, so you can apply the skills to your situation.

While Ken’s visible minority status and recent move to Canada are a combination of variables more often seen in the habitual reader’s motivation cluster, and are more likely to put the reader in a position of cumulative disadvantage, in Ken’s case they do not interact to disadvantage him or spur him to read in a habitual way. He has chosen to date women within his own ethnic and citizenship group, so experiences no discrimination on that front; as a full-time student he is not attempting to join the Canadian labour market, so also avoids potential discrimination in that regard. With his craving for clarity during a time of acute relationship upheaval, confessed love of goal setting, and absence of compounding life challenges, Ken’s motivation cluster orients him toward the targeted mode in search of what he terms a “secret weapon” for sorting out his problem. Further, and typical of targeted consumers, Ken makes no mention of his social location and cultural background standing in tension with what he has read in the books; likewise, he cites no instances of the books’ advice creating social boundaries that mark him as an outsider. Instead, Ken sees the books he consulted as relevant texts that affirm his lifestyle and presuppose access to resources that are within his reach.

Men dominate the targeted reading group in the sample of readers, but women also engage in targeted consumption. Although previous studies of reception—with their focus on gender as a key variable shaping consumption modes—suggest that a woman’s targeted reading might be considerably different from a man’s approach, men and women here show considerable gender overlap in their approaches within the targeted mode. This underscores the importance of combination effects within motivation clusters, as social location (including, most importantly, gender) interacts with biographical triggers and the realm of needs and wants. For Irene, a 20-year-old drama student, an acute life event triggered her turn to self-help reading: the onset of social anxiety that worried her family and prompted her to seek help. She began seeing a medical professional about her anxiety issues, but when the two of them failed to mesh in terms of their ideas about treatment, Irene turned to self-help for a second opinion and a way of coping without taking medication. Initially, she consulted advice on overcoming social anxiety, but quickly segued into relationship advice, using it to address concerns over her tendency to have “really bad breakups.” She found the advice reading helpful and somewhat cathartic, and
implemented some of the authors’ suggestions but emphasizes that she prefers fiction reading and has since refocused her energies on other genres.

A white woman from a middle-class background, Irene did not paint a picture of a life filled with multiple sources of stress, discrimination and stigma. Although she cited an additional, significant issue that compounded her relationship issues—concerns over her social anxiety—these were not further compounded by other experiences of social disadvantage. She carried out time-limited and goal-oriented reading with serious intent, motivated by a strong desire for clarity in improving her situation and an equally strong desire for privacy in working through her issues. Like Ken, Bruce, and other targeted readers, she expressed no desire to use self-help reading as a means of connecting with others, gaining a stronger sense of belonging to a community, or growing spiritually. While Irene’s added challenge of social anxiety does bring her closer to a habitual reader’s life context, she still comes within the realm of targeted reading by virtue of her motivation cluster and the close match between her middle-class lifestyle and the books’ assumptions about readers’ social location.

There is thus some internal variety among targeted readers—including gender variation that the reception literature would not have us anticipate—but a distinct cluster of variables nonetheless appears to combine with the self-help genre to channel readers toward the targeted consumption mode. The three vignettes offered here highlight the key variables at play beyond gender: the reader’s overall membership in the cultural mainstream or position of cumulative advantage; pragmatic, short-lived and goal-oriented episodes of reading motivated by acute events that do not form a durable part of the reader’s lifestyle; no or virtually no articulated cultural disconnect between reader and texts; and no articulated awareness of social boundaries created by textual messages that disadvantage these advantaged readers.

“It’s Just, I Guess, Sort of a Lifestyle”: Habitual Consumption of Advice Books

Despite the self-help genre’s aim of providing pragmatic advice to readers, and the reasonable expectation that most readers would therefore turn to the genre with the serious and goal-oriented approach characteristic of targeted reading, more readers in the sample (21, i.e. 58%) sought out
advice books for much more than the advice itself. The reasons these readers, which I call habitual readers, cite for turning to the books are also broader than the relationship-centric motives named by targeted readers: they include using the books for fun, escape, spiritual growth and to address feelings of social marginalization. For the majority of habitual readers, self-help consumption helps to dispel feelings of loneliness, satisfies a craving for community (albeit superficially and indirectly), and functions as a tool for addressing sources of stigma, stress and discrimination beyond those generated directly by relationship challenges. Habitual readers thus display a fundamentally divergent motivation cluster, and while gender also appears to be a central factor in generating reading mode here, gender alone is insufficient to determine a reader’s chosen mode.

Habitual consumption, in contrast to targeted reading, is done as part of the reader’s broader lifestyle, goals and interests. Although one biographical trigger may act as “the last straw” to push a reader to consume relationship advice more intensively for a period of time, the habitual reader has often had prior exposure to the genre before their intensive reading episode, and keeps on reading the genre even when the catalytic event has passed and/or been resolved. Most often, habitual reading involves a less methodical reading style, involves “grazing” a variety of texts and is sometimes done for “fun” or “just to relax.” While there may be an ebb and flow to the volume of habitual readers’ consumption, it is nonetheless continuous. Whereas all targeted consumers turn to advice material with problems and goals, some habitual consumers (40%) have—by their assessment—largely unproblematic love lives. As such, they do not always read out of emotional pain rooted in a relationship crisis; just as often, they consult the advice for recreational purposes and out of a general interest in human relationships. They rarely take notes or do prescribed exercises while reading (29% report doing so at least once, compared to 73% of targeted readers), but enjoy entertaining broad philosophical questions that arise from their reading and like reading about others’ lives through vignettes, even though the anecdotes may not be applicable to their own lives.

For most habitual readers, like 28-year old neuroscience researcher Veronica, self-help reading appears to function as a tool for coping with multiple life transitions:

Obviously, after so much relocating and moving and adapting to people around me, sometimes it's nice to read something on it and try to sort of give it [her experiences with relationships] some structure. […] So when I read something
on relationships, it kind of helps me to put them into context, and give it a bit of a structure.

She finds herself in the midst of a whirlwind of life change, and over the past two years has looked increasingly to self-help to provide her with a framework for understanding how her life and feelings about relationships are changing. Born and raised in Malaysia, her studies and employment have already taken her to four continents, and at the time of the interview she had recently moved to Canada for the first time. She worked briefly in Toronto, but had since quit her job and was taking a few months to regroup and rethink her career path. She acknowledged that sustaining relationships had always been a struggle given her frequent international moves, and explained that now—during her transitional time—reading self-help was figuring prominently in her daily routine. The reading was not only providing her with the comfort and clarification she needed and desired while transitioning, but was also addressing her growing spiritual hunger. Although Veronica did not grow up in a family with a spiritual or religious practice, she now wants to explore her spiritual side as part of her search for structure and clarity.

Veronica is in many respects a typical habitual reader: women make up the majority of habitual consumers (81%), and this group includes more ethnic minority readers (48% as opposed to 33% amongst targeted readers). While many report a comfortable lifestyle and earnings, they are more likely than targeted readers (19% as opposed to 7%) to mention one or more periods of financial struggle (fortunately, Veronica has never struggled financially). Much of this struggle is linked to immigration and challenges surrounding integration into the Canadian labour market: 62% are foreign born, of which nearly half were educated outside of Canada. Through the compounding effects of these minority statuses, the typical habitual consumer is in a position of cumulative social disadvantage, in contrast to the targeted consumer’s overall advantage.

While habitual consumers openly acknowledged their interlocking sources of stress, discrimination and disadvantage during our conversations, they tended to describe them, as well as romantic challenges, in terms of prolonged struggles and frustrations—not the acutely distressing biographical triggers common amongst targeted readers. On a social-psychological level, these consumers express great interest in self-improvement and deepening self-knowledge; they often self-identify as spiritual and/or religious (48%) and are more likely than the targeted readers (43% compared to 13%) to consult with a professional such as a therapist and to discuss what they have been reading with friends and family. (Two additional readers indicated that they
would seek professional guidance if the cost were not so prohibitive.) Thus, while the self-help genre by itself seems suited to pragmatic, targeted consumption, when combined with the core variables of a habitual consumer’s motivation cluster it generates a habitual mode of reading. Again, this underscores the role of combination effects in generating modes of reading, and the importance of paying attention to much more than gender when theorizing about what leads to different modes of reading.

Andrea, a 26-year-old health sciences researcher with a typically habitual approach to advice reading, explains that she has been reading relationship self-help since her teens. Her initial exposure to the genre came when her mom gave her an advice book to get her through her first breakup. Since then, she has explored relationship self-help in various media, from books and online content to television and audiobooks. Having grown up in a family with a strong reading culture, she has read similar, relationship-themed content in chick lit and romance novels for years. She reads for many reasons, namely relaxation, escape, and personal betterment; while feeling “the warm fuzzies” from reading is not necessary, she does acknowledge that it is an added bonus. Her approach to reading the genre is casual and varied, in contrast to the more rigid approach found in targeted reading:

When I’m in a phase when that’s [i.e. relationships] not part of my life in the physical sense or the more romantic sense, like I’m not in a relationship, I’ll read less. But I’ll also go through three or four months where I’ll read every night, sections. And I tend to pick up things I’ve read before when I get busy as well. […] I’ll read maybe an hour, maybe 15 minutes depending on how long it takes to relax and wind down and fall asleep. If I’m in a period where I’m not reading religiously before bed I tend to have an audio book on my MP3 player so when I’m in transit I do a lot of walking and that’s how I’ll get my reading.

Socio-demographically, Andrea’s profile is suggestive of a targeted reader: she belongs to the dominant culture and reports no struggles tied to her social position. Her biography and her perceived needs and wants, however, orient her toward habitual reading: she uses the genre to grapple with ongoing questions, and to satisfy needs and wants that stem from much more than relationship-centric concerns.

Even though many readers with this continued reading approach, like Andrea, enjoy light moments in their consumption (71% report pleasure, escape and relaxation as important motivations for reading), many also take the reading very seriously, believing that they are on a
lifetime mission to continually learn and improve through self-help’s lessons. To Marvin, a 49-year old worker at a homeless shelter, reading relationship advice is central to his life because he is “always wanting to improve, always wanting to share my experience.” He criticizes the narrowly goal-oriented approach to advice consumption, insisting that improving one’s relationships skills is an ongoing process:

> We have to be goal oriented. The problem is—is assuming that you are there. You’ve reached there. Because by your actions, you can tell we’re not there. So, you know, it’s important not to be arrogant and think that I’ve read the book, I’m there. Because life will always knock on the door and say, Hey, I’ve got something else for you.

Marvin recognizes several prolonged and stressful formative experiences, namely immigrating from the Caribbean as a boy, serving in the military and working through a lengthy separation from his former partner, as biographical triggers encouraging his use of the genre to confront life’s big questions and challenges—not just those stemming from relationships. Most importantly, he credits his work as a counselor for increasing his interest in the genre.

Ironically, given the highly individualistic focus of self-help (see Rimke, 2000), habitual readers report that reading has functioned as a pathway into community—albeit in an indirect way, and as a result of its shortcomings. Habitual readers acknowledge that the incomplete helpfulness of the genre, meaning its usefulness in offering strategies for addressing challenges, but frequent failure to deliver solutions suited to readers’ unique circumstances and broader life contexts, has often spurred them to discuss material read with friends, family members, and counselors or therapists, and to discuss their problems on Internet fora with international communities of participants. Rosa, a 57-year-old retired teacher and habitual consumer whose sexual dysfunction has profoundly impacted her long-term relationships, turned to an online support community recently after reading self-help for forty years and feeling that though her experiences were validated by the texts, she was merely “spinning her wheels” without implementing appropriate or durable life changes. Finally, through dialoguing with others and framing discussions of her challenges within her broader life context, she feels that she can now tackle her issues with the support and tailored advice that self-help books—while “moderately” helpful—could not fully provide.
Marvin and Rosa, like typical habitual readers, define an excellent book as one that pushes the reader to continually improve and to see their place in a community or the “bigger picture,” all the while offering some levity despite its often serious subject matter. Yet, as evidenced by Rosa’s experience, this sense of community is not always gained directly through the books themselves; paradoxically, it develops out of the reader’s quest for what the book fails to deliver. To habitual readers, a great book also does not offer tidy answers so much as ideas and options for exploration. Amongst targeted readers, excellence is instead measured by a book’s straightforwardness and its ability to generate results and offer solutions. Although both modes of reading involve an understanding that relationships are something to be “worked on” (see also Illouz, 1997), habitual reading approaches the process through a much broader project of contemplation and self-awareness. Nonetheless, readers of both modes find common ground in their belief that an excellent book offers substance, honesty, realistic expectations and resonates with their personal experiences.

Targeted and habitual readers’ divergent definitions of excellence, and the way in which they rationalize their evaluation criteria, suggest that modes of reading generate cultural evaluation schema, as opposed to existing as distinguishing characteristics of modes of reading. When justifying their evaluation of a book as excellent, readers refer back to the way in which they prefer to read, suggesting that their evaluation scheme has emerged from their reading style. Ken particularly enjoyed one book he read because he likes reading relationship advice in the same intense, analytic way he reads material for his university courses, and the book offered him concrete information and step-by-step action plans that he could assess and implement in a similar manner. Andrea tends to pick books up for short periods, and wants a combination of insight and entertainment each time she reads; she explains that because she grazes, she particularly likes books that can succeed in making her laugh and think deeply despite the limited attention she often gives them.

**Challenging Advice: Cultural Dissonance and Habitual Readers’ Subsidiary Reading Modes**

All readers interviewed cited at least one instance where they disagreed with a book’s advice; in such cases, readers either abandoned the book altogether or skipped over objectionable sections
until they came to content they deemed more reasonable or relevant. For a subset of habitual readers (10, i.e. 48%), disagreeing with a book’s content involved a more intensive act of protest than simply ignoring particular sections: these readers challenged the texts’ advice through a process of talking back, and half of them also engaged in transcoding. As defined in reception literature—where they were identified as modes of reception among ethnic minority consumers—talking back involves challenging and resisting dominant ideologies and portrayals; transcoding implies disagreement with such ideologies and portrayals, and involves reworking or reinterpreting them through a politicized and culturally conscious lens (Stewart, 2003; Everett, 2000). I thus suggest that transcoding goes “one step further” to challenge the text and see it through different eyes, given that all readers in my sample first talked back, and only half proceeded to transcode.

Why are transcoding and talking back only present among habitual readers of relationship advice? I argue that the greater the felt cultural dissonance between the books the reader reads and the reader’s lived experience, the more the reader is likely to engage in talking back and transcoding. Because habitual readers are more likely than their targeted counterparts to be outside of the dominant culture through a combination of minority statuses (60% of readers who talk back have multiple minority statuses; all of those who talk back and transcode have combined minority statuses), they are most likely to express dissatisfaction with the advice and see a need to reinterpret it from their own social standpoint. Habitual readers, unlike targeted readers, also express awareness of how the texts’ messages create and maintain social boundaries by validating or promoting the lifestyle and resources of advantaged members of the cultural mainstream; such awareness is most acute amongst those who transcode and talk back.

Carlos, 45 and a recent immigrant to Canada, is a habitual reader who talks back to the texts he disagrees with. An investment banker by training who has now started his own business, Carlos criticizes advice books for their promotion of unrealistic “American clichés” like authors’ stance that women can demand a $25,000 wedding and expect their husbands to be main providers. Carlos discussed, at length, his disappointment in North American advice’s focus on men’s financial status, saying he and his underemployed immigrant friends will never be able to live up to the standards set by advice writers and the women who heed their suggestions. As such, he refuses to date “gold-diggers,” but does not do further deep, reinterpretive work on the text to
look at how such “American clichés” advantage dominant social groups and perpetuate his marginalization—both in the dating market and beyond.

The cultural dissonance that provokes talking back and transcoding can also begin before readers move to their new cultural context, as in Janine’s case. Now 27, Janine read bestselling American advice books as a teenager growing up in Kenya. To her, reading the books in a culture divorced from the North American context in which they were written led her to question and subsequently reject some of their advice, along with the underlying assumptions they made about gender roles. She argues that while the books often promote a promiscuous sexuality that has become acceptable—if not necessary for boosting romantic desirability—among North American women, it is at odds with her moderate Christian upbringing and the mainstream Kenyan belief that virginity in 20-something women is something to be respected, not mocked. What is more, she stresses that the advice will not resonate with anyone from regions like Kenya where the harsh reality of HIV/AIDS has spurred a return to more conservative messages about intimacy. Janine can see how the advice might “work” for a white, Canadian-born woman, but says her adoption of it would involve “selling out” culturally. Refusing to adopt the advice has the equally upsetting effect of reinforcing Janine’s inferior outsider status.

She has searched, unsuccessfully, for advice marketed to culturally transplanted women like her, and expresses disappointment in the self-help industry for the paucity of advice it offers to consumers outside of the cultural mainstream. Dissatisfied minority readers like Janine can take their transcoding of texts beyond private disagreements and make their objections public by posting critical comments on advice websites or writing letters to a magazine editors to voice their opinions. Janine has not done so yet, but is aware that the option exists. For now, her strategy remains one of limited protest through transcoding, much like the strategies Puri (1997) and Shively (1992) noted among readers experiencing cultural dissonance between text and lived experience.

DISCUSSION

It is widely accepted in reception studies that readers’ modes of reading a given type of book can vary, but little attention has been devoted to getting at what generates different modes of reading.
Using non-fiction advice books about relationships and their largely heterogeneous audience, this research thus questioned what leads to different modes of self-help reading. Findings suggest that modes of reception are generated through combinations of type of book and motive for reading. In the case of relationship self-help, the genre combines with one of two dominant motivation clusters to produce either a targeted or habitual reading mode. Variables within readers’ motivation clusters, which are made up of a reader’s socio-demographic characteristics, biographical triggers and perceived needs and wants, interact to generate a targeted or habitual consumption approach. It is not isolated variables such as gender and social class, but rather combination effects of variables in a motivation cluster, that together generate a particular mode of reading. This evidence of combination effects complicates previous understandings of how and why readers read, which have tended to focus on variables in isolation or in their interactions with one or two other factors. Findings suggest that researchers’ original focus on gender and reception is not off-base, given its central role in contributing to choice of reading mode here; these readers demonstrate, however, that gender never operates alone. In attempting to understand why gender’s influence is so strong, we could consider findings in light of Schweickert’s argument (1986)—heavily influenced by psychoanalytic theorizing—that, due to men and women’s differing upbringings, men value autonomy and strive to “get it right” (hence their preference for pragmatic, targeted reading), whereas women place greater emphasis on connection through relationships (and therefore habitual approaches). I suggest, however, that while these processes appear to play some role in the production of modes of reading, Schweickert’s argument oversimplifies understandings of reader’s motivations, risks essentializing gender and holds less explanatory power for cases of readers outside of the dominant culture.

Among habitual readers, those who report feeling the greatest cultural dissonance between the texts they read and their own life experiences move beyond passive disagreement with the advice they have read to more active challenges to the books’ messages. This happens through two subsidiary modes of targeted reading, namely talking back and transcoding. While engaging in active disagreement through talking back and transcoding can be therapeutic for readers, and helps them understand how their social location has contributed to their disagreement with the advice presented in the text, it is problematic because—as with other experiences of reading (e.g. Radway, 1984)—it offers a limited form of protest. Moreover, given that talking back (at 60%)
and transcoding (at 100%) are modes exhibited by readers with multiple minority statuses, findings from this research suggest that self-help readers who belong to the dominant culture do not tend to actively challenge texts’ advice that perpetuates social inequalities in the romantic marketplace as well as other social fields. Indeed, advice books appear to function as powerful tools of social boundary maintenance and creation through their championing of dominant/mainstream lifestyles and resources, and their largely uncritical acceptance by readers who occupy positions of cumulative social advantage. Consequently, while the books may purport to democratize the field of dating and marriage (and though authors’ wish to do so may be genuine), they in fact accomplish the opposite.

Returning to my initial statement about how this research extends knowledge of reception, it answers the call for increasing amplitude (i.e. addressing a bigger range of cultural objects) in cultural theorizing by moving away from the usual focus on fiction reading and focusing on how readers consume non-fiction genres. In addition to looking at reception of a largely unexplored genre, it also departs from the typical interest in what and how people read for pleasure to explore readers’ readings of material intended for practical use, which we can expect them to approach with a different—and perhaps more varied—set of motives than readers of romance fiction or mystery novels. By choosing a hugely successful genre consumed by a varied audience, relationship self-help, I have attempted to get at a broad range of readers’ motives, along with diversity at the level of their life experiences. This broadened focus has illuminated the complex but patterned ways in which readers’ socio-demographic profiles, life events and felt needs and wants channel them toward a particular mode of reading, and subsequently generate cultural evaluation schemes. Consequently, though findings do speak to the considerable influence of a traditionally focal variable—gender—in generating modes of reception, they emphasize the need to look much more broadly at readers’ motivation clusters.

Although the theoretical ideas I have generated here derive from a study of self-help reading, they can and should be used to investigate how modes of reading are generated among audiences of other varieties of practical non-fiction, such as books about travel, food and cooking, home décor and renovation, and some fashion writing. I propose that similar processes are at work among readers of these genres, though the emotionally and ideologically charged nature of some writing about relationships likely generates more talking back and transcoding than objections to other non-fiction writing.
Finally, while this study did not aim to look longitudinally at readers or enable me to inquire sufficiently into durability and change in modes of reading over the life course, such inquiries would offer a valuable information as to how and why a reader’s reading solidifies into a given mode, and whether common triggers precipitate such changes. I am well aware that several of my youngest participants are still forming their ideas about relationships as well as their patterns of advice seeking. Following readers longitudinally will not only enable better understanding of how modes solidify in readers, but will enable us to draw from the literature on stress and strain in theorizing how biographical triggers contribute to the process.
CHAPTER 5
Conclusions and Discussion

OVERVIEW OF THEMES AND CONTRIBUTIONS

Each of this dissertation’s substantive chapters can stand on its own as an independent contribution to sociological understandings of culture and gender, but the three studies presented here were designed to speak to each other and advance understandings of an overlapping set of issues. This section thus serves as an opportunity to consider the dissertation’s substantive sections together, focusing on central themes and contributions. It proceeds to consider the limitations of the research, and proposes new directions for exploring issues emerging from and/or left unanswered by the studies considered here.

Using Relationship Self-Help to Illuminate Changing Gender Roles, Social Structures and Ideologies

Sociologists have often used cultural goods—especially texts—as windows into processes of structural and cultural change (e.g. Ohmann, 1996; Parr, 1999). There is consequently nothing new about turning to a cultural product with the expectation that it will offer insight into the broader social context of its production. Using relationship self-help texts to accomplish this goal, however, has not been a focus for sociologists—particularly in a longitudinal sense. This is surprising, given the immense popularity and commercial success of the genre, but I suggest that it is because relationship-focused self-help has traditionally been marketed and perceived as a tool for grappling with deeply private and individual issues. Further, sociological exploration of self-help’s neoliberal undertones (Rimke, 2000) and its tendency to ignore the socio-political context of individuals’ problems (Philip, 2009) have perhaps dissuaded researchers from using the genre to illuminate macro-level change.
This research, however, is founded on the argument that, even in the realm of relationship self-help, the personal is political: when books apparently ignore social context, writing about relationships in individualistic terms, they are still shaped by broader social forces. Chapter 2 offers the most comprehensive look at micro-macro linkages, following the genre’s most popular publications over a fifty-year period and capturing ideological shifts and tensions in books’ messages that would not be apparent over shorter time spans. While the longitudinal look at ideas about women’s needs and wants demonstrates that perceptions of central relationship challenges have not changed much in half a century—for instance, the household division of labour, work-life balance, and sexual and emotional satisfaction remain core issues in books—the ways in which the discussions are framed have evolved around broader structural and cultural changes. Most notably, momentum in New Social Movements (e.g. second-wave feminism and gay rights movements) maps onto messages promoting gender equality and experimentation in relationship forms, while strengthening neoliberal politics, postfeminist ideology and the prominence of the New Christian Right coincide with messages encouraging a re-traditionalization of heterosexual intimacy. Although Chapter 3’s sample of men’s books spans a shorter period (fifteen years), the books’ central strategy of “masculinizing” intimacy—i.e. moving away from traditional displays of masculinity while continuing to frame the behaviour as manly—needs to be understood within a broader social context of a “crisis of masculinity” and recent social movements that link heterosexual masculinity, self-discovery and spirituality.

While it is not possible to argue that a causal relationship exists between broad structural and cultural changes and advice books’ messages about heterosexual intimacy, there is a strong case for reciprocal influence, particularly in the direction of broad social changes influencing authors to discuss and debate their import in self-help publications. Highly influential cultural figures like Oprah Winfrey also shape the self-help agenda by promoting particular issues and authors (Kingston, 2011; Lamb, 2005). I therefore suggest that we think of the connection between self-help and broader social change as a mutual imprint, albeit one that flows more from the broader cultural context to the pages of advice books where it is distilled into a focused conversation. Chapter 4’s discussions with self-help consumers support this argument, as the majority of readers—particularly habitual consumers—emphasize the usefulness of the advice in helping them interpret changing demands and expectations.
Persistent Tensions Between Progressive and Traditional Messages in Relationship Advice

As articulated in the introduction and Chapter 2, academic and mainstream conversations about relationship advice have tended to characterize the genre’s messages about heterosexual intimacy as overwhelmingly progressive (e.g. Giddens, 1992) or generally alarming in their conservatism (e.g. Boynton, 2003). These analyses have been founded on time-limited samples or non-systematic analyses of book content. My research has sought to address these shortcomings by providing a longitudinal look at the genre and paying attention to messages aimed at both men and women, all with the intent of providing a more complete and nuanced picture of advice books’ messages.

Instead of revealing a clear, linear progression toward gender egalitarianism or an unchanging focus on traditional arrangements, the data in Chapters 2 and 3 reveal a much more complicated picture: Chapter 2 demonstrates a recent re-traditionalization of ideas about intimacy, with some progressive ideas mixed into newer books’ ideological schema; Chapter 3 shows resilience in promoting gender difference and manliness in men’s books—a message that stands in tension with some books’ non-traditional promotion of emotional heroism and tempered ambition.

Indeed, ideological tension is a constant across both book samples and even within books’ dominant ideological schema; tensions exist in spite of overarching trends toward change in constructions in femininity and masculinity. The persistence of tensions alerts us to the dangers of drawing conclusions based on time-limited samples, and to the non-linear nature of ideological change more broadly. In society, as in advice books, ideas do not take root immediately or totally (except, perhaps, under extraordinary circumstances—see Swidler, 1986). As articulated in Chapter 2, evolution in ideas about heterosexual intimacy can be understood using the concept of dialectical progress and cultural change in expectations and desires for intimate life (Gramsci, 1978; Hegel, 1812). Consequently, this research also offers a broadly applicable contribution to sociological understandings of the dynamics of ideological change.

What is visible across advice book samples and within books’ ideological schema is tension driving progress in ideas about relationships, whereby some traditional ideas about intimacy persist or resurface while new, progressive ones appear, always in slightly new packaging to reflect changes in macro-level social structure and ideology. This produces ideological tensions
over time and within schema, even though an overall message of equality or change may dominate (as is the case in Chapters 2 and 3).

On a similar note, Chapter 4’s conversations with self-help readers reveal a tendency—particularly among habitual readers—to read books piecemeal, rejecting suggestions that are at odds with their own values or preferences while reading (and often re-reading) passages that resonate. By readers’ assessments, some books present approaches to dealing with relationship challenges that seem ideologically inconsistent; one reader, for instance, champions Steve Harvey’s *Act Like a Lady, Think Like a Man* (2009) for its promotion of women’s equality, but criticizes it for encouraging a “Southern gentleman” ideal of the family patriarch. All findings remind us that, despite the presence of ideological trends and schema in advice about a given topic, internal tensions appear to fuel discussions and ideological constructs as much as do consistencies.

I suggest that it is important to pay attention to tensions in the books’ messages—meaning ideological disagreements or contradictions both within and across self-help titles—because it reveals a dialectical process whereby authors, both independently and in response to others’ ideas, grapple with conflicting visions of intimate life in an attempt at getting at the “truth” or discovering the “right” way to be an intimate partner. Given that self-help is highly prescriptive literature, the genre is particularly suited to acting as a forum where, over time, authors contribute to continually evolving debates with the hope of arriving at eliciting “truth” about effective intimate strategies and exposing ineffective or false beliefs. It is this process of dialectical reasoning, which is by necessity fuelled by disagreements and tensions, that enables ideas about intimacy presented in self-help to evolve overall, even as older ideas are retained and synthesized into ostensibly “new” perspectives. The presence of tensions in relationship advice and the dialectical nature of messages’ evolution also suggests that authors’ discussions will never stagnate into two fiercely opposed ideological camps. Rather, I posit that there will always be some common ideological ground among authors, and that authors will display continued interest in adopting some ideas that appear to contradict their overall message, but will integrate them in a re-worked way that presents them in a new light.
Texts and Audiences Over the Life Course

While the data considered here present clear evidence that trends in books’ advice map onto broader social changes, they also reveal that messages are driven by books’ target audiences. And although authors’ tailoring of advice to match their audience is to be expected, the way in which it plays out in men’s books (Chapter 3) is surprising. Whereas we might expect books aimed at younger audiences comprised of today’s Gen X and Gen Y men to promote greater departure from traditionally masculine behaviour, it is books aimed at Baby Boomers that offer men the greatest leeway by championing emotional heroism and tempered ambition. (Messages aimed at older readers nonetheless present progressive suggestions as being fundamentally “masculine,” thereby policing boundaries between masculinity and femininity.)

A broader implication of this finding is that there does not appear to be one overarching prescription for masculinity; rather, manifestations of masculinity in heterosexual intimacy are expected to evolve over the life course, so long as no apparent or actual crossing into “feminine” territory occurs. Furthermore, the finding suggests that men are expected or encouraged to be increasingly, though not fully, experimental in their experiences of heterosexual intimacy as they age without facing social sanctions. This raises questions as to why authors offer a broader range of acceptable expression to older men, and whether men in fact feel more comfortable moving away from mainstream scripts for intimacy as they get older. That said, the core theoretical insight generated in Chapter 3—that messages in men’s books place continuing emphasis on gender difference and thereby enable a reconfiguration of heterosexual masculine intimacy within hegemonic masculinity—reveals that the books that men read at all points of their adult lives function as tools of boundary creation that reinforce gender inequalities through the promotion of hegemonic gender beliefs. Consequently, for men across the life course (and the women with whom they are intimate), the books’ messages have limited democratizing potential.

Chapter 4 also contributes to understandings of relationship advice and the life course, though from the point of view of readers. While findings do not point to a significant correlation between age and mode of reading, they do underscore the impact of biography, alongside socio-demographic and psychological factors, in generating modes of reading. Of particular interest is the role that experiences of marginalization, uprooting and prolonged struggle appear to play in
pushing readers of both genders toward habitual self-help consumption. On a theoretical level, this finding points to the need for continued exploration of how variables—beyond the typical focus on gender—combine to inflect reception. In sum, studies of the texts and their readers both underscore variability in content and reception in relation to readers’ biographies and locations in the life course, but emphasize their common role as tools of socialization and distinction and contributors to social inequality.

Self-Help’s Western Roots and Diversifying Audiences: Exploring and Managing Tensions

In the introduction, I outlined self-help’s origins as an American genre written by and for white, affluent, Anglo-Saxon Protestants, with relationship-focused advice targeted primarily to married couples (Starker, 1989). I also explained that while a segment of contemporary audiences continues to fit this demographic profile, today’s consumers depart increasingly from it and encompass a range of ethnic, religious and cultural backgrounds and socioeconomic statuses. Thus, while most cultural producers of this genre continue to be members of the dominant culture on many if not all socio-demographic dimensions, an important part of their audience today is not. This gulf produces tensions between the genre’s Western, socially privileged viewpoint on relationships and the divergent experiences and viewpoints of audience members who fall outside of it. Given the increasing cultural diversification of North America and the ubiquity of self-help products throughout, we can expect such tensions to build in the coming years. By tensions, I again refer to ideological disagreements.

The themes and ways of framing discussions about heterosexual intimacy encountered in Chapters 2 and 3 presuppose a standard of living, a level of access to capital (in economic, social and cultural senses) and facility with mainstream cultural practices in line with the dominant culture’s experiences. Thus, discussions about equality, self-betterment, open expression of emotions and sexual desire, and the pursuit of what Giddens (1992) more broadly terms the project of emancipation dominate over talk of fitting in, making ends meet and making do with limited resources. Analysis of textual messages therefore suggests that some readers may feel alienated by mainstream books’ assumption of a reasonably privileged audience. Granted, some
self-help texts do have an aspirational focus, and encourage readers to move from the margins to the centre of the dominant culture (see Ouellette, 1999). In these instances, however, readers do not begin from a position of extreme marginalization and can reasonably expect to improve their social position by following the books’ advice.

Interview data from Chapter 4 confirm that tensions exist between the continued Western, affluent viewpoint taken by relationship self-help authors and readers who occupy inferior positions in social space. These tensions push readers with the greatest experiences of cultural dissonance between text and lived experience to engage in talking back and transcoding. But, while readers find these strategies cathartic, they are forms of limited protest that do nothing to re-arrange macro-level inequalities. Further, they do not push the genre to evolve beyond its limited target audience so that it might advise a broader audience and in so doing generate more profit.

Will the coming decades bring more diversity to the genre—in books and other media—by addressing the experiences of those outside the cultural mainstream? This is likely, since subjects interviewed in Chapter 4 cite some advice materials (mostly new, Internet-based sources) as helpful in grappling with issues related to intimacy, cultural diversity and marginalization. I anticipate, however, that demand for more diverse viewpoints will continue to outpace supply, and that cultural gatekeeping will continue to limit the range of viewpoints—particularly in non-Internet fora. This gulf between messages and audiences merits continued attention. I suggest that future work in this area build on the theoretical advancements made in Chapter 4 by continuing to work with the “motivation cluster” concept and investigating how certain motivation clusters are linked to certain reading experiences and outcomes. Such analyses should then address how outcomes link up with or contribute to broader processes of social exclusion.

**Relationship Self-Help as a Window into Modes of Reading**

Although this contribution comes out of the final substantive chapter, instead of building a thread throughout the dissertation, it merits emphasis here because of its value in advancing understandings of consumption beyond this dissertation’s focal genre. I have argued in Chapter
that studying relationship self-help reading builds knowledge by combining a genre rarely considered in reception studies and an unexplored primary motive for reading (practical/pragmatic purpose). The central finding that combination of type of book and motive for reading generate a particular mode of reading can be applied to studies of other genres; given that reading with practical intent has led Chapter 4’s readers to adopt a targeted or habitual mode suggests the fruitfulness of exploring whether this is consistent across other genres read for practical purposes (e.g. writing on cooking, home décor and travel). The additional finding that readers’ motivational clusters are made up of socio-demographic factors, biographical triggers and needs and wants also enriches reception theory by pushing us away from more traditional attempts at theorizing about modes of reading with one variable—most often gender. As I have commented earlier, the often emotionally and ideologically charged nature of discussions about intimacy may lend themselves to a greater likelihood of transcoding and talking back among habitual readers of relationship advice than habitual readers of other practical genres. Still, we will not be able to comment on correlations until these areas have been investigated.

LIMITATIONS

This dissertation has aimed to illuminate the major angles from which sociologists studying culture examine cultural goods: the cultural object in question, its audience, and its broader cultural context (including some consideration of the production context). That said, even a substantial research project like this one has limitations that require acknowledgement. Firstly, although the scope of the self-help industry—including the industry niche catering to relationship advice—is immense, I have limited my focus to books and discussed the genre’s presence in other media only in passing. This narrowed focus has been necessary in order to offer an analysis of sufficient depth overall, to allow for a consistent unit of analysis in Chapter 2’s historical analysis, and to enable a more accurate comparison of modes of reception across readers in Chapter 4. Over 80% of my research subjects in Chapter 4 made it abundantly clear to me that they also consult relationship advice in other media—including magazines, newspapers, television, and the Internet—and I am well aware that this research captures very little about the content and the consumption approaches connected to self-help reading beyond books. Internet content about relationships, in particular, has enjoyed exponential growth in recent years, but the
impact of self-help’s explosion on the Web is not addressed here. Perhaps most importantly, it is vital for us to keep in mind that Internet-based relationship advice is governed by different—and most often looser—rules determining what enters the public domain. The lesser industry gatekeeping surrounding relationship advice on the Web results in greater diversity of content, and likely of intended audience, which readers of this research need to keep in mind when interpreting my findings.

It has also been necessary for me to limit my historical look at self-help and its cultural context to the past half-century, and to focus exclusively on texts intended for a heterosexual audience. Relationship-themed self-help has a rich history in North America, and while I have chosen to concentrate on a period of particularly marked change in ideas about and patterns of intimacy, I must leave it to others to trace the genre’s messages about intimacy back to the Puritans’ first publications (see Erickson, 1999, Seidman, 1991 and Starker, 1989 for more longitudinal historical insight). The genre is also being marketed increasingly to gay, lesbian and bisexual audiences; while publications intended for such audiences were by necessity circulated underground during the first years covered in Chapter 2’s sampling frame—given the illegality of same-sex relationships in North America—they are now widely available in stores and libraries. In order to reasonably limit my theoretical foci and my sampling frames, however, I have not been able to include products for gay, lesbian and bisexual audiences in my analyses.

While the readers interviewed in Chapter 4 offer considerable insight into how, why and what they consume in the genre, my approach to studying the audience also carries limitations. Though some research participants—particularly those in their 40s and 50s—did talk about their experiences of reading self-help as far back in time as forty years ago—my research does not follow them longitudinally, and cannot assess stability or evolution in their reading approaches alongside changes in their lives. For research participants that offered insight into their not-so-recent pasts, I have had to rely on their recollections and must acknowledge the potential inaccuracies associated with using participants’ recollections as data.

Chapter 4’s audience research is also restricted to consumers in one city, Toronto, albeit a large and cosmopolitan city with potential to capture diversity in self-help readership. While I recruited widely in the city and did not carry out snowball sampling, thereby increasing the potential for diverse backgrounds among participants, the sample nonetheless lacks a comparison
group, so findings cannot be taken to be representative of reading in other contexts. Further, some socio-demographic groups are underrepresented in the sample of readers, namely white men and individuals lacking college or university education; while it is not clear as to whether this reflects the self-help audience in general (I suspect it does) or limitations of the sampling design, we must acknowledge that the sample does not approximate the research context’s population on all major socio-demographic dimensions.

In keeping with my decision to omit books for gay, lesbian and bisexual audiences from the samples in Chapters 2 and 3, I have also limited Chapter 4’s sample to readers who self-identify as heterosexual. We cannot assume that the modes of reading detected in a heterosexual sample are representative of non-straight audiences, particularly displays of resistance to products’ messages like talking back and transcoding. While we might suspect, given that a non-heterosexual orientation distances consumers from the dominant culture, that gay, lesbian and bisexual readers would be more likely to engage in habitual reading, talking back and transcoding, this cannot be inferred without studying the readers themselves.

I am, of course, fully aware that my own socio-demographic profile (I am a young, white woman with high educational attainment) and my role as a researcher likely impacted what readers chose to share with me, despite my best efforts to encourage open and relaxed dialogue. Researchers, however careful to remain unobtrusive or marginal to the data collection process, do impact the interview data they collect. While inevitable, my imprint on the interview data must be recognized.

Finally, this project has not concentrated on cultural producers, namely the authors, editors and publishers of the books considered here. Most hold powerful gatekeeping roles, shaping the content and format of the advice that reaches consumers (see Alexander 1996; Becker, 1982; Hirsch, 1972, 2000). It is also important to recall that these gatekeepers also face and work alongside considerable industry constraints that filter what does and does not make it onto bookstore and library shelves. Given that this research concentrates on books—a self-help medium particularly susceptible to the forces of gatekeeping and industry constraints (as compared to Internet content, particularly)—we must realize that the cultural goods which ultimately reach consumers do not represent the full range of relationship advice ever created.
FUTURE DIRECTIONS

Many of the shortcomings noted above point directly to opportunities for broadening and deepening my initial research agenda. In light of Chapter 2’s finding that there is a re-traditionalization of intimacy encouraged through popular advice books, future research should follow the trend forward to see where it leads, and which contextual factors appear to be fuelling its continued popularity or waning presence. Given that the global financial crisis hit at the very end of Chapter 2’s sample, and given the strong linkages the data demonstrate between economic climate and advice about intimacy, I suggest paying particular attention to its impact on ideas about gender roles, particularly masculinity (this is a topic that some of my newest men’s books begin to explore—e.g. Boteach, 2008). Also, as suggested above, there is great potential in broadening Chapter 2’s historical project by going back in time and tracing self-help’s messages about gender and intimacy over other significant periods, such as the transition from World War II to the post-war era.

Chapter 3’s discovery of a “masculinization” of intimacy merits further study, including exploration across other media; research might consider men’s magazines and the explosion of reality television, where recent, successful shows like The Bachelor and Millionaire Matchmaker have presented influential—and arguably evolving—portrayals of both successful and shameful masculinity. Men’s relationship self-help, and related products and services, require greater attention.

The research on self-help’s contemporary audience begun here suggests the fruitfulness of following self-help consumers longitudinally, particularly younger readers who are still in the process of forming ideas about relationships and advice-seeking, and gravitating toward a mode of reading that will potentially be durable though later adulthood. Admittedly, such a study design is challenging and would take years to yield desired results, but would shed considerable light on the formation and potential evolution of consumption modes over the life course. And just as future research should broaden its scope to consider texts for gay, lesbian and bisexual audiences, the audience itself for these products should be investigated, with particular attention to how the readers’ minority status affects their encounters with texts. Research in this vein promises to generate new concepts and theoretical ideas about modes of reading. On a final audience-focused note, the scope of research will need to broaden to include people who
consume relationship advice in media other than books; as noted in Chapter 4, the present project only illuminates consumption experiences of individuals who are part of a “reading culture,” and who read avidly beyond the genre itself. What do less committed advice seekers have to say about their experiences of consuming beyond the traditional book format? Are there many consumers who read just as keenly as those profiled here, but never consult books? These questions merit exploration.

In closing, I will stress the need for research on the goods and their audiences to move beyond their current Western confines. Although self-help products are profoundly Western, they are available worldwide for consumption: consider Griswold’s (2000) startling discovery of American author Marabel Morgan’s classic self-help book, *The Total Woman* (1973)—included in Chapter 2’s sample—in a dusty and disorganized Nigerian bookstore. These products are everywhere, and so too are audiences; subsequent studies should work with Griswold’s theorizing about “global cultural transfer” (2000) to get at how the products’ significance changes across social contexts. The scope of the relationship self-help market is immense and growing, and options for expanding our understandings of it are consequently numerous. I anticipate that the project undertaken here will offer a helpful springboard for research in the directions suggested above. It is likely, given the continued evolution of self-help into new media and audience niches, that many exciting turns in the field await.
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APPENDIX I

CHAPTER 2 BOOK SAMPLE

Sample of Bestselling Books and their Presence on Bestseller Book Lists


1960s: All titles found were included in the sample

All other decades: Stratified random sample of 10 books per decade

**1960s**

1. Published 1961
Bestseller lists 1961
   - *Life With Women and How to Survive It*
     Joseph H. Beck
     (July 3; 17-August 28; September 11-18; October 9; TOTAL of 11 weeks)

2. Published 1962
Bestseller lists 1962-1963
   - *Sex and the Single Girl*
     Helen Gurley Brown
     (July 23-January 7, 1963; TOTAL of 24 weeks)

3. Published 1964
Bestseller lists 1965-1967
   - *Games People Play*
     Eric Berne
     (August 23-October 2, 1967; TOTAL of 109 weeks)

**1970s**

1. Published 1971
Bestseller lists 1971
   - *The Sensuous Woman*
     “J”
     (March 1-March 15; March 29-October 25; November 8-November 15; TOTAL of 36 weeks)

2. Published 1971
Bestseller lists 1971-1972
   - *Any Woman Can!*
     David Reuben
     (October 11-January 17, 1972; TOTAL of 14 weeks)

3. Published 1972
Bestseller lists 1972
   - *Open Marriage*
     George O’Neill and Nena O’Neill
     (April 3-April 10; April 24-December 18; TOTAL of 37 weeks)
4. Published 1972
Bestseller lists 1972-1981
The Joy of Sex
Alex Comfort
(December 4-January 11; January 1-January 8; January 22-April 22, 1974; February 2, 1976-April 26, 1976; May 17; July 19-January 3, 1977; January 17-May 9; May 23-June 13; July 4; July 18-October 31, 1980; November 21-December 5; January 2, 1981; February 13-March 20; TOTAL of 306 weeks)

5. Published 1973
Bestseller lists 1974-1975
More Joy of Sex
Alex Comfort
(August 19-September 2; September 16-December 9; September 13-27, 1976; March 7, 1977; TOTAL of 20 weeks)

6. Published 1973
Bestseller lists 1974-1975
The Total Woman
Marabel Morgan
(November 4-25; March 31, 1975; April 21-June 2; July 7-21; August 11-18; 17 weeks)

7. Published 1974
Bestseller lists 1974
Creative Divorce
Mel Kranzler
(March 25-April 29; TOTAL of 6 weeks)

8. Published 1976
Bestseller lists 1976-1978
Your Erroneous Zones
Wayne W. Dyer
(August 16-November 7, 1977; February 13-April 3, 1978; April 17-June 19; July 3-September 18; TOTAL of 94 weeks)

9. Published 1978
Bestseller lists 1978
The national love, sex & marriage test:
Are you as good a mate as you think you are?
Rubin Carson
(March 13; TOTAL of 1 week)

10. Published 1978
Bestseller lists 1979
How to Get Whatever You Want Out of Life
Joyce Brothers
(March 12-April 16; April 30-May 21; TOTAL of 10 weeks)

1980s

1. Published 1981
Bestseller lists 1981-1982
The Cinderella Complex: Women’s Hidden Fear of Independence
Colette Dowling
(July 31-December 11; March 12, 1982; July 30; August 13-October 1; TOTAL of 30 weeks)

2. Published 1981
Bestseller lists 1982
What Every Woman Should Know About Men
Joyce Brothers
(February 26; March 26-May 28; TOTAL of 11 weeks)
3. Published 1982
Bestseller lists 1982
  Why Do I Think I Am Nothing Without A Man?
  Penelope Russianoff
  (June 25; TOTAL of 1 week)

4. Published 1982
Bestseller lists 1982
  How to Make Love to a Woman
  Michael Morgenstern
  (July 2-October 15; TOTAL of 16 weeks)

5. Published 1982
Bestseller lists 1983
  How to Make Love to Each Other
  Alexandra Penney
  (March 25-April 1; TOTAL of 2 weeks)

6. Published 1983
Bestseller lists 1983
  Men are Just Desserts
  Sonya Friedman
  (July 1; July 22-July 29; August 12; August 26; TOTAL of 5 weeks)

7. Published 1985
Bestseller lists 1985
  Smart Women, Foolish Choices: Finding the Right Men and Avoiding the Wrong Ones
  Connell Cowan and Melvyn Kinder
  (July 12-November 15; TOTAL of 19 weeks)

8. Published 1985
Bestseller lists 1985-1987
  Women Who Love Too Much
  Robin Norwood
  (August 2; August 16-October 25; November 15-December 6; January 24, 1986-August 21, 1987; September 25-October 2; November 6; TOTAL of 101 weeks)

9. Published 1986
Bestseller lists 1986-1987
  Men Who Hate Women and the Women Who Love Them
  Susan Forward and Joan Torres
  (September 12-December 26; January 23, 1987-July 31, 1987; TOTAL of 44 weeks)

10. Published 1987
Bestseller lists 1987
  How to Marry the Man of Your Choice
  Margaret Kent
  (August 7-October 30; TOTAL of 13 weeks)

1990s

1. Published 1990
Bestseller lists 1990
  Secrets About Men Every Woman Should Know
  Barbara DeAngelis
  (March 2-June 29; July 20; TOTAL of 19 weeks)
2. Published 1991
Bestseller lists 1991
  **Light Her Fire**
  Ellen Kreidman
  (June 14-June 21; TOTAL of 2 weeks)

3. Published 1992
Bestseller lists 1992-1993
  **Keeping the Love You Find**
  Harville Hendrix
  (February 3-March 2, 1992; February 1-March 8, 1993; TOTAL of 12 weeks)

4. Published 1992
Bestseller lists 1992-1998
  **Men Are From Mars, Women Are From Venus**
  John Gray
  (August 10-August 31; April 5, 1993-April 26; May 17, 1993-April 14, 1997; July 28-November 24; January 26, 1998; February 23-March 2; August 3; August 24-October 5; TOTAL of 238 weeks)

5. Published 1992
Bestseller lists 1992
  **Are You the One For Me?**
  Barbara DeAngelis
  (September 14; September 28-November 9; TOTAL of 8 weeks)

6. Published 1994
Bestseller lists 1995-1996
  **Ten Stupid Things Women Do to Mess Up Their Lives**
  Laura Schlessinger
  (February 20, 1995-January 1, 1996; January 15-April 29; May 27-June 17; July 22-August 12; August 26-September 30; October 14; TOTAL of 76 weeks)

7. Published 1995
Bestseller lists 1995
  **Mars and Venus in the Bedroom**
  John Gray
  (April 10-September 25; October 23; TOTAL of 26 weeks)

8. Published 1995
Bestseller lists 1996-1997
  **The Rules: Time-Tested Secrets for Capturing the Heart of Mr. Right**
  Ellen Fein and Sherrie Schneider
  (October 14-March 14, 1997; TOTAL of 23 weeks)

9. Published 1997
Bestseller lists 1997
  **Mars and Venus on a Date**
  John Gray
  (July 7-August 25; TOTAL of 8 weeks)

10. Published 1998
Bestseller lists 1998-1999
  **In The Meantime**
  Iyanla Vanzant
  (April 20-December 14; January 11, 1999-February 22; August 23-November 22; TOTAL of 56 weeks)
2000s

1. Published 2000
Bestseller lists 2003
The Hard Questions: 100 Essential Questions to Ask Before You Say “I Do”
Susan Piver
(March 3-March 31; TOTAL of 5 weeks)

2. Published 2000
Bestseller lists 2000-2001
Relationship Rescue
Philip McGraw
(February 5; February 21-June 12; July 24-October 9; November 13-December 4; February 12, 2001-February 19; March 5-May 14; TOTAL of 47 weeks)

3. Published 2001
Bestseller lists 2001-2002
The Worst-Case Scenario Survival Handbook: Dating and Sex
Joshua Piven, David Borgen and Jennifer Worick
(December 10-January 7, 2002; TOTAL of 4 weeks)

4. Published 2001
Bestseller lists 2002
10 Stupid Things Couples Do to Mess Up Their Relationship
Laura Schlessinger
(February 18-March 11; TOTAL of 4 weeks)

5. Published 2004
Bestseller lists 2004
The Proper Care and Feeding of Husbands
Laura Schlessinger
(January 19-July 12; TOTAL of 26 weeks)

6. Published 2004
Bestseller lists 2004-2005; 2009
He’s Just Not That Into You
Greg Behrendt and Liz Tuccillo
(October 4-April 11, 2005; May 9-June 27; September 5-September 26; February 2, 2009-February 9; February 23-March 9; TOTAL of 44 weeks)

7. Published 2005
Bestseller lists 2005
It’s Called A Breakup Because It’s Broken
Greg Behrendt and Amiira Ruotola-Behrendt
(October 10-October 31; TOTAL of 4 weeks)

8. Published 2005
Bestseller lists 2005-2006
Love Smart
Philip McGraw
(December 19, 2005-March 13, 2006; TOTAL of 12 weeks)

9. Published 2006
Bestseller lists 2006
Lies at the Altar
Robin L. Smith
(September 11-September 25; TOTAL of 3 weeks)

10. Published 2009
Bestseller lists 2009
Act Like a Lady, Think Like a Man
Steve Harvey
(February 9-June 22; TOTAL of 22 weeks)
APPENDIX II

CHAPTER 3 BOOK SAMPLE


(Data from Bowker’s Books in Print, cross-referenced with barnesandnoble.com and amazon.ca)

MANTAK CHIA and DOUGLAS ABRAMS
The Multi-Orgasmic Man: Sexual Secrets Every Man Should Know
1996

LAURA SCHLESSINGER
Ten Stupid Things Men Do to Mess Up Their Lives
1997

DAVID DEIDA
The Way of the Superior Man
1997

BERNIE ZILBERGELD
The New Male Sexuality, Revised Edition
1999

GARY SMALLEY
Winning Your Wife Back Before It’s Too Late
1999

STEPHEN ARTERBURN (with FRED STOEKER)
Every Man’s Battle
2000

LOU PAGET
How to Give Her Absolute Pleasure
2000

STEPHEN ARTERBURN and FRED STOEKER (with MIKE YORKEY)
Every Woman’s Desire
2001

STORMIE OMARTIAN
The Power of a Praying Husband
2001

GABE FISCHBARG
The Guide to Picking Up Girls
2002

Team of 11 authors
Esquire’s The Rules: A Man’s Guide to Life
2003

PETER POST
Essential Manners for Men
2003
JIM GEORGE  
*A Husband After God’s Own Heart*  
2004

MICHAEL CASTLEMAN  
*Great Sex*  
2004

C.J. MAHANEY  
*Sex, Romance, and the Glory of God*  
2004

IAN KERNER  
*She Comes First*  
2004

CLIFFORD and JOYCE PENNER  
*The Married Guy’s Guide to Great Sex*  
2004

DAVID WEXLER  
*When Good Men Behave Badly*  
2004

ELLIOTT KATZ  
*Being the Strong Man a Woman Wants*  
2005

DAYLLE DEANNA SCHWARTZ  
*How to Please a Woman In & Out of Bed*  
2005

EVE SALINGER  
*The Complete Idiot’s Guide to Pleasing Your Woman*  
2005

NEIL STRAUSS  
*The Game*  
2005

MARCY MICHAELS  
*The Lowdown on Going Down*  
2005

JAMES BASSIL (Ed.)  
*AskMen.com Presents From the Bar to the Bedroom*  
2007

WAYNE LEVINE  
*Hold On To Your N.U.T.s*  
2007

CHARLOTTE KANE  
*Sex Machine*  
2007

MICHAEL ANTONIO  
*The Excusive Layguide*  
2007
MYSTERY
The Mystery Method
2007

CLIFFORD and JOYCE PENNER
The Way to Love your Wife
2007

EMILIE BARNES
What Makes a Woman Feel Loved?
2007

VICTORIA ZDROK
Dr. Z on Scoring
2008

JEFF FELDHAHN and ERIC RICE (with SHAUNTI FELDHAHN)
For Young Men Only
2008

BARNEY STINSON
The Bro Code
2008

SHMULEY BOTEACH
The Broken American Male and How To Fix Him
2008

NEIL STRAUSS
Rules of the Game
2009
APPENDIX III

CHAPTER 4 LIST OF PARTICIPANTS AND BASIC DEMOGRAPHIC INFORMATION

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>NAME</th>
<th>GENDER</th>
<th>AGE</th>
<th>EMPLOYMENT</th>
<th>CAN BORN</th>
<th>VIS MIN</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Adam</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>Security guard</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>Y</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alejandro</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Mid-30s</td>
<td>Sales associate</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>Y</td>
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<tr>
<td>Alexis</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>Grocery store employee</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>N</td>
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<tr>
<td>André</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>Lawyer</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>N</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Andrea</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>Medical researcher</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>N</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bruce</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Mid-40s</td>
<td>Musician and teacher</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>N</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Carlos</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>Banker and entrepreneur</td>
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<td>N</td>
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<td>28</td>
<td>Graduate student</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>N</td>
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<td>Christopher</td>
<td>M</td>
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<td>Musician</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>N</td>
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<tr>
<td>Connie</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Early 40s</td>
<td>Runs family business</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>Y</td>
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<tr>
<td>Dan</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>25</td>
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<td>N</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dave</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>Firefighter</td>
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<td>N</td>
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<tr>
<td>Elise</td>
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<td>Lawyer</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>N</td>
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<tr>
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<td>Retired accountant</td>
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<td>Y</td>
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<tr>
<td>Irene</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>Undergraduate student</td>
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<td>N</td>
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<tr>
<td>Janine</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>Statistician</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>Y</td>
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<td>Jean-Stéphane</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>Civil servant</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>N</td>
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<tr>
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<td>AGE</td>
<td>EMPLOYMENT</td>
<td>CAN BORN</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Katya</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>Undergraduate student</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>N</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ken</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>Undergraduate student</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>Y</td>
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<tr>
<td>Kiera</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>Banker</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>N</td>
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<tr>
<td>Kim</td>
<td>F</td>
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<td>Undergraduate student</td>
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<tr>
<td>Laura</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>Civil servant</td>
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<td>N</td>
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<td>F</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>Undergraduate student</td>
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<td>Marvin</td>
<td>M</td>
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<td>Shelter worker</td>
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<td>F</td>
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<td>Maxine</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Late 30s</td>
<td>Environmental educator</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>Y</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pamela</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Late 30s</td>
<td>Teacher</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>N</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Patricia</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>Civil servant</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>N</td>
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<td>Graduate student</td>
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<td>Tim</td>
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<td>Ordained minister</td>
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<td>Veronica</td>
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<td>Neuroscience researcher</td>
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