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## Getting Laid and Growing Close: Constructions of Masculinity in Relationship Advice for Heterosexual Men

**Abstract** Despite the growing popularity of men's self-help products, recent debates surrounding hegemonic masculinity, and attention to the "crisis of masculinity," research has ignored men's advice about intimate relationships. Consequently, I examine 30 contemporary relationship advice books and conceptualize their constructions of heterosexual masculinity. Findings demonstrate authors' overall rejection of hegemonic masculinity, alongside an overarching strategy of "masculinizing" intimacy that promotes two subsidiary gender strategies – relational heroism and tempered ambition – which reframe non-hegemonic behavior as manly. The overarching strategy appears in mild forms in books emphasizing "getting laid" and stronger variants in books that promote "growing close" through intimacy. The strategy promotes a promising departure from the constraints of hegemonic masculinity by broadening men's acceptable range of talking about and doing masculinity, but continues to emphasize gender difference and enables a reconfiguration of heterosexual masculine intimacy within hegemonic masculinity, thereby limiting its promotion of gender equality.

**Keywords** Masculinity; Gender; Relationships; Self-Help; Books

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 (Simonds 1992; McRobbie 2009), it is expected that men's products offer comparable insight into how cultural and structural changes have impacted heterosexual men's experiences in – and ideas about – intimate relationships with women.

Some researchers have approached men or boys in late adolescence directly to ask about their intimate experiences and expectations as straight guys

(Redman 2001; Allen 2007; Gilmartin 2007; Kimmel 2008), and this work provides valuable insight into 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 (Ridgeway and Correll 2004) that continues to reinforce hegemonic ideas about gender and attendant inequalities.

In order to round out the understandings generated by interview data, I propose turning to a widespread and highly successful cultural product whose discourses about masculinity and heterosexual intimacy carry considerable potential to influence behavior and ideas in men of various ages and from varying socio-demographic locations. Using a sample of 30 contemporary books aimed at heterosexual men and widely available in the North American book market, 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 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 representations of and recommendations to men 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 potential to promote gender equality in intimate heterosexual relationships.

### Reconfiguring Masculinity Through Relationship Advice

Numerous genres and forms of texts, including men's health and lifestyle magazines (Mort 1996; Benwell 2003a; 2003b; Gill 2003; Singleton 2003; Rogers 2005), "lad lit" books (Gill n.d.; Kimmel 2006a), men's religious advice books (Donovan 1998), and website content aimed at men (Masters 2010), offer rich sources of information on the construction and revision of ideas about masculinity. Relationship advice books, given their combination of extensive bodies of text and somewhat lesser subjection to content and format constraints than magazine and newspaper content (such as syndicated men's columns), offer a particularly information-dense window into such ideas. Like studies of masculinity 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 – particularly in North America. The self-help industry as a whole is worth billions of dollars, and self-help reading materials generated a \$406 million USD profit in the United States in 2009; sales are predicted to top \$850 million USD annually by 2014 (Linder 2009; Nielsen BookScan 2010). An independent market research publisher estimates, based on proprietary data obtained from major distributors of self-help products, that the entire American self-help market was worth \$10.53 billion USD in 2009

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(Marketdata Enterprises 2010). Although robust data on the size and composition of relationship advice's male readership is scant, the presence of men's books on "big box" bookstore shelves and frequent references to them in other popular culture fora suggest that they are a popular source of information – and entertainment – about masculinity and intimacy. This continued sales 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; McGee 2005), 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) and American masculinity (Kimmel 2006b). Further, relationship advice texts are instructive to gender scholars insofar as they offer a look at gender policing through mediated intimacy, a process whereby "our understandings and experiences of a whole range of intimate relationships are increasingly mediated by constructions from film, television, magazines, the Internet, and popular fiction" (Gill n.d.).

My research thus speaks to current trends and 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 (Morley and Robins 1995; Peterson 2005; Ollivier 2006; Lizardo and Skiles 2008). 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. I thus suggest that the study of men's advice texts and their constructions of masculinity merits development of its own theoretical and conceptual vocabulary.

### **Hegemonic Masculinity: "Crisis" and 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, meaning durable or patterned strategies of feeling and acting that reconcile one's personal, ideologically-shaped feeling rules with situations (Hochschild 1989; 1990). Thus, this research answers the need for a more specific look at suggested changes by focusing on the concrete, prescriptive discussions of advice book authors.

Discussions about the crisis of masculinity have flourished over the past two decades, but originate in the 60s; they consistently suggest that cultural-

ly normative constructions of masculinity have lagged behind democratizing changes in men's and women's lives (Kimmel 2006b:173-185). Scholars and cultural critics posit that men of varying ages are experiencing a crisis of masculinity (Horrocks 1994; Faludi 1999; Kimmel and Messner 2000; Jackson, Stevenson, and Brooks 2001; Kimmel 2006b; 2008), characterized by feelings of emptiness, loneliness, rage, and self-questioning about identity and life purpose. This line of argument suggests that men's enactment of hegemonic 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 towards something more freeing that measures manliness by men's integrity and commitment to egalitarian gender relations as opposed to their financial situation and professional status. The call for change appears to function both as a measurement against commitment to egalitarian gender relations, and as a movement away from overly technical gender identities that have derived pride from being the bearer of logic. That said, contributors to the crisis debate envision and define crisis differently: some take an essentialist approach to masculinity, arguing that there are ways of being masculine that are both natural and "right" (see Kahn 2009:193-208), while for others (e.g., Kimmel 2006b) masculinity is seen as being in flux, and as such crisis itself is central to definitions of Western masculinity. To Connell (1995), who conceptualizes crisis at both the level of gender order and masculinity, it is through crises in masculinity that we see symptoms of broader crisis tendencies in the gender order.

Gender scholarship emphasizes the variety of masculinities lived out by men, and ethnographic accounts of masculinities (e.g., Gutmann 1996; Meuser 2003; Taga 2003) reveal the tensions, contradictions, instability, and room for agency inherent to them, even in ethnically homogeneous contexts. That said, concerns about the crisis of masculinity center on the harmful effects of hegemonic masculinity – a concept referring to the form of masculinity that is valued and dominant 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 "traditional" masculinity (Connell 1995; Stibbe 2004:33; Connell and Messerschmidt 2005), 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. Despite overall consensus in the field of movement towards more fragmented and subtle enactments of hegemonic masculinity (Beynon 2002; Connell and Messerschmidt 2005), Soulliere (2006) identifies competitiveness, achievement/success, risk-taking, emotional restraint, and courage/toughness as characteristics that consistently figure in media representations of men and are associated with dominant hegemonic masculinity in North America. I thus use these widespread patterns of presentations of men to inform my data analysis.

It is important to acknowledge, however, that the concept of hegemonic masculinity – while central to both my analysis and masculinities scholarship

– has faced critique and invited refinement. Notably, Wetherell and Edley (1999) emphasize that, as originally formulated, the concept imposed excessive unity on a more fluid reality, excluded positive behavior while emphasizing negative aspects, and risked entrapment in reification. These critiques have generated calls to recognize the fluidity, reciprocal influence, and historical variability of masculinities, and raised awareness that hegemonic masculinity should be understood as more about agentic positioning than static “types” of men (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005). In short, newer formulations of the concept suggest that – across time and space – men can strategically bring themselves closer to or distance themselves from enactments of hegemonic masculinity to suit their aims. Such positioning is, of course, shaped by structural and cultural constraints.

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 enactments of masculinity that match current media representations of “pure” hegemonic masculinity. That said, recent theoretical debates suggest that we should expect to see a range of presentations of masculinity in the texts that may approximate hegemonic masculinity in varying ways and to various extents.

## Data and Method

The sample consists of 30 contemporary relationship advice books aimed at a heterosexual male audience. With the exception of two books, all are

authored by North Americans who were residing primarily or exclusively in the United States or Canada at the time of the book’s publication, thereby giving the sample a consistently North American cultural perspective. [With regard to the exceptional cases, one is a book co-authored by a North American and non-North American, and the other is a book authored by a non-North American residing in the United States.] 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 57 percent male (single or co-authored), 27 percent female (single authored), 10 percent mixed (co-authored), and 6 percent by a team of three or more authors (with men as majority in all multiple author cases). Most authors in the sample thus expect to impart advice to readers of the same gender – given their statements that men are the intended audience – and most authors 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 intentionally excluded books with an overarching religious focus, given their tendency to espouse an ensemble of views about sexuality and gender

that depart significantly from those that appear in mainstream secular advice (see: Donovan 1998; Bartkowski 2000; Heath 2003; Wilkins 2009). Eight of the sample’s books (27%) offer limited discussions of religion and spirituality; however, these do not operate as key organizing frameworks for the books and their constructions of masculinity, and authors do not assume religious affiliation and/or practice on the part of readers. Though ostensibly (and certainly according to booksellers’ classification criteria) representing one unified genre, it is important to note that the sample’s books are in fact quite heterogeneous in their messages about masculinity and intimacy; specifically, books polarize into titles that emphasize “getting laid” and sexual conquest, and titles that focus instead on “growing close” through emotional intimacy. Their differing approaches to masculinity and intimacy are also evident in the texts’ contrasting titles, for example, *The Guide to Picking Up Girls* and *From the Bar to the Bedroom* versus *What Makes a Woman Feel Loved* and *Being the Strong Man a Woman Wants*. The opposing foci and approaches of the two general book categories promote differing support for the books’ gender strategies, as will be discussed below.

It is also notable that, while all books explicitly indicate that they are taking on heterosexual relationships in their commentaries, the forms of masculinity promoted in the texts could apply – to variable extents – to same-sex relationships. Some authors included in the sample publicly support same-sex unions (see: Hunter 2012), which further suggests the potential applicability of books’ advice to same-sex relationships. That said, the titles in this sample are not marketed specifically

to the same-sex demographic as per publishers’ booklists, and books’ narratives frequently center around gender difference and the challenges it poses in intimate relationships, thereby suggesting a presumed heterosexual audience.

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 late 2012, all titles were available for purchase online by North American customers. The sampling frame consisted of all relevant books published between 1995 and 2011, and coincides with a marked increase in publications of this genre. Consistent with the periodization used in other studies and discussions of the genre (McRobbie 2009), it encompasses a period following a 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 approximately 6,750 pages of text. [See Appendix for book list.]

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 behavior 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 20 percent of customers purchased books five years old and older (Lorimer and Barnes 2005). 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; Simonds 1992; 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 an interpretive qualitative approach to analyze the data, whereby I read the books closely, carefully, and repeatedly to reveal patterns and overarching themes in how authors characterized ideal masculinity (see: Glaser and Strauss 1968; Altheide 1996). The analytic approach thus allowed for fluidity as I reflected on and reformulated my understandings of the books' constructions of masculinity. My analysis focused on the following guiding questions: 1) How are real men described in the text through vignettes and autobiographical accounts (including the full spectrum of so-called

"ideal" to "flawed" men)? 2) What are men told to do by the author(s) in order to achieve their full potential? 3) How are women (as wives, partners, and girlfriends) described in the text in terms of their real and ideal roles in relation to men? 4) How are real women described in the text through vignettes and autobiographical accounts (full spectrum of so-called "ideal" to "flawed")? 5) How do/does the author(s) describe the ideal heterosexual relationships? 6) What do/does the author(s) see as major obstacles to achieving a satisfying intimate life for men? For women?

As indicated above, I used Soulliere's (2006) discussion of characteristics frequently associated with hegemonic masculinity in media representations (itself based on synthesis of multiple studies) to guide my data analysis.

## Findings

Recalling the guiding questions above that have directed the data analysis, I argue that the books in this sample represent two distinct sub-genres that utilize two overarching strategies for describing masculinity and masculinity problems; I term these sub-genres "getting laid" and "growing close." [I will use the distinction between these two sub-genres as my frame for further analysis.] These differing strategies develop in part out of differing central masculinity problems that each sub-genre asserts and then addresses, with the growing close sub-genre focused on men's difficulties with emotional openness and self-awareness, and the getting laid sub-genre most concerned with men's tentative approaches to fulfilling personal and profes-

sional goals which impede success in both realms. But, while these fundamental differences partly explain each sub-genre's insistence on one set of characteristics versus another, both sub-genres do share a common understanding of femininity and the female partner insofar as both emphasize women's typically different relationship and life orientation as compared with men, manifested in women's particular focus on connectedness, nurturance, and family unity. This, in turn, partly explains the failure of both sub-genres to radically challenge the notion of men as agentic heroes who can readily adapt to (and in so doing control) all situations. Yet, there is some overlap between men and women's perceived and so-called acceptable opportunities to challenge traditional gender relations in the growing close sub-genre, most notably in discussions of women's emotional strength and drive in working towards personal goals. Overall, though, the sample's books portray women as focused on nurturance and connectedness, with ideal heterosexual relations as unions that flourish when a strong male protector/breadwinner shares his life with a committed, nurturing woman. Such portrayals of women and ideal heterosexual relations shed light on the predominantly traditional gender relations advised by the writers.

Further strengthening the books' overall focus on traditional as opposed to new and emancipatory arrangements is their failure to treat issues of race/ethnicity, and their virtual silence on issues of social class (the only notable exception being Michael Antonio's insistence, in *The Exclusive Layguide*, that a man can still partner with desirable women even if he does not "make a fortune").

## Overarching and Subsidiary Strategies

Contemporary relationship advice books for men promote an overall rejection of hegemonic masculinity, arguing that it is unhealthy – emotionally and psychologically – both for men and their women partners, exacerbates existing relationship problems, and sets a poor example for the next generation of men. However, authors do not discard facets of hegemonic 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; I define this strategy as one that encourages men to depart from emotional restraint through increased emotional openness and vulnerability, and to soften stoicism and self-reliance while exploring a broader range of emotional expression with intimate partners and other individuals. Authors also propose *tempered ambition* as a strategy for moderating materialism and risk-taking (financial, interpersonal, and physical), while remaining solid breadwinners; this is also a call for men to tone down competitiveness and recognize that achievement and success are only valuable and noble within the framework of an emotionally fulfilling life. Gill has developed the concept of "unheroic masculinity" in reference to the masculinity enacted by protagonists of the "lad lit" genre – one she describes as "fallible, self-deprecating, and liable to fail at any moment" (2003 n.d.). While my use of the term relational heroism is not intended as a strict antonym for Gill's concept, it should be understood as encompassing a gender strategy that stands in tension with Gill's unheroic masculinity.

Relational heroism and tempered ambition operate within an overarching strategy of “masculinizing” intimacy that encourages non-hegemonic gender strategies and characteristics while reframing them as manly and reassuring men that the subsidiary strategies will not compromise their masculinity and heterosexuality. The overarching strategy promotes a promising departure from the constraints of hegemonic masculinity in two ways.

First, it broadens men’s acceptable range of interpretive repertoires, meaning the discourses or ways of talking about masculinity that men can draw from as they deploy gender strategies, and which function as structuring sets of ideas and behavioral injunctions (Gill et al. 2005). This is valuable insofar as prior research (Edley 2001; Gill 2003; Gill et al. 2005) has highlighted the surprisingly limited range of interpretive repertoires that men draw on, which points to the power of hegemonic ideals in constraining constructions of masculinity.

Second, it opens up a space for the creation and enactment of new compromise formations, meaning formations of masculinity that help men bridge their contradictory desires or emotions and provide them with a middle ground when weighing different gender strategies (Alperstein 2010). Compromise formations may, for instance, bridge desires and emotions that stand in tension because of their differing positions in relation to hegemonic masculinity (e.g., “I want to be an active lover who satisfies her sexually but I also want to share my feelings of vulnerability with her,” “I want to be regarded as a successful professional but also as someone who is involved in family life”). Con-

sequently, compromise formations hold promise as a tool for facilitating movement away from the constraints of hegemonic masculinity while likely causing less psychological distress or threat of social sanctions than a bold departure from hegemonic enactments of masculinity. But, despite these promising outcomes, which make inroads into moving understandings of intimacy and love away from the incomplete and “feminized” perspective dominant in mainstream North American culture – a perspective that equates love with the feminine and with affective qualities as opposed to a blend of instrumental and expressive qualities (Cancian 1986) – they contribute to continuing emphasis on gender difference. Further, given that a minority segment of the advice books with a pronounced focus on getting laid either largely or entirely opposes the strategies of relational heroism and tempered ambition, it cannot be concluded that the genre as a whole is moving away from constraining and traditional constructions of masculinity. Rather, the minority segment of this heterogeneous genre offers mixed implications for the overall emancipatory potential of men’s advice books, and the tendency of oppositional books to be marketed to younger readers invites questioning as to whether the genre will see a longitudinal increase in books promoting traditional constructions of masculinity.

### **Balancing Heart and Spine: Authors’ Push**

#### **Towards Relational Heroism**

Authors are strongest and most unequivocal in their rejection of hegemonic masculinity’s emotional and attitudinal dimensions, and do so by promot-

ing a strategy of relational heroism. Authors call on readers to open up to their partners – in short, to grow close – 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. The strategy’s main goal appears to involve broadening understandings of what constitutes appropriate masculine affection in heterosexual intimacy, from largely instrumental definitions to definitions that merge instrumental and affective qualities. Fourteen of the sample’s books (47%) offer strong support for the strategy, nine (30%) offer moderate support – and at times internal ambivalence or contradiction in a book’s messages – and seven (23%) provide overall opposition. While the books demonstrating support for the strategy correspond to titles that emphasize growing close, those that challenge or fully oppose the strategy frame their content around a focus on getting laid.

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 and hostility, but unacceptable to show feelings – like anxiety, fear, love, and trust – that suggest vulnerability, and by extension femininity. *The Way of the Superior Man* (1997), a strong proponent of relational heroism, exemplifies author’s efforts at recasting emotions as characteristics of manly men:

[t]his 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. [p. 1]

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

[i]t 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]

Although self-help literature has been criticized for its myopic fixation on readers’ needs and its tendency to ignore the structural and cultural root of personal problems (Rimke 2000), authors strongly advocating relational heroism do acknowledge – albeit through brief and occasional comments – men’s cultural pressure to be stoic and emotionally subdued. *The Broken American Male*, another strong advocate of relational heroism, assesses the contemporary American man’s emotional dilemma: “[i]mmersed 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:

let's stop saying that "masculine" approaches to life are bad. Let's start saying that part of a healthy masculinity is being *unafraid* of your total human self. [*Ten Stupid Things Men Do to Mess Up Their Lives*, 1997:31]

Not only does emotional suppression disempower men and keep them from being fully human, according to champions of relational heroism, but it also prevents them from being authentically strong men who know who they are and what they want. Emotional disclosure is the mark of a real man:

[b]ehind 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. [*How to Please a Woman In & Out of Bed*, 2005:81]

These authors concur 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 masculine activities, like playing sports and reading newspapers. They suggest 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.

In the sample's books that offer moderate support for relational heroism, the push towards emotion-

al openness and expressiveness characteristic of strong support gives way to instances of ambivalence surrounding the appropriate relationship of emotion to masculinity and intimacy. *Hold On To Your N.U.T.s* (2007), a relationship book that encourages men to identify and uphold what the author calls non-negotiable, unalterable terms (i.e., core values), tells men to snuff out any sissiness by exercising emotional restraint and internalizing feelings of frustration:

[men] continue to act like needy little boys, especially when things aren't going well and when a strong man is just what the situation requires. Men who want to be happy as men, and successful in their relationships, need to be initiated into manhood and learn to silence their little boy. [2007:60]

At the same time, however, the author encourages men to get in touch with their "true feelings" (2007:30) and to be an emotional "rock" for their partners:

[b]eing the rock doesn't mean stuffing it, being emotionally unavailable and acting like a robot. It means being able to listen to her without being distracted by the little boy screaming in your head. It means knowing that it's OK for her to feel and to say whatever she wants...you'll be showing her how much you care. [2007:131]

While books with moderate endorsement of relational heroism offer a clear message that expectations for men's emotional lives need to change to enable broader repertoires of expression, such prescriptions are not always consistent in terms of how

change can and should come about. In a contradiction typical of books supporting moderate relational heroism, the author encourages men to create emotional connections with potential dates, but not immediately: "[i]t's one of those things that, if done too soon, will come off like you are trying too hard to gain rapport with her – a DLV [demonstration of lower value]" (*The Mystery Method* [2007:171]).

Titles focused on getting laid, by contrast, approach the strategy of relational heroism with either arguably negligible support or outright opposition; this segment of the sample and genre thus stands in tension, at a very fundamental level, with titles that endorse men's emotional evolution. Instead of encouraging authors to grow close through men's full emotional disclosure, these books prioritize men's quest to get laid (whether in the framework of marriage, long-term partnership, or dating) and endorse moderate to extreme stoicism while emphasizing its importance as a feature of manliness. They appear to be marketed primarily to younger men (namely, men under 40) and those who are largely single or dating, as evidenced by titles, 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. Contradictions present within and between books that offer moderate support for the strategy are largely absent in this cluster; here, authors propose coherent approaches to men's emotional intimacy, albeit ones that encourage enactment of hegemonic masculinity.

Authors who criticize or fully oppose the strategy of relational heroism argue that self-reliance and

the stiff upper lip are men's necessary allies when trying to establish intimate relationships with women. In short, "a bro never cries" (*The Bro Code* [2008:x]) because it undermines his masculinity:

[w]omen 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. [*The Exclusive Layguide*, 2007:22]

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. [*From the Bar to the Bedroom*, 2007:186]

Emotional reserve is explained as a prerequisite to scoring sexually with women, since it is "subconsciously interpreted by women as a sign of virility" (*Dr. Z on Scoring* [2008:46]). This can lead men into manipulative games like the "freeze-out," as one author freely admits in a narration of his past conquest:

[i]f women have sex for validation, [the author] figured, why not take validation away from her? His plan was to be cold and ignore her, until she became so uncomfortable that she wanted to cozy up to him just to make things normal again. [*The Game*, 2005:177]

For these authors, communication is considered important "in the sack," but has questionable value in other situations; "[t]he real man talks brief and clear. He does not go into unnecessary details" (*The Exclusive Layguide* [2007:22]) because guys who do are not true men.

### **Curtailing Soulless Capitalism: Authors' Endorsement of Tempered 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 masculine gender strategies 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/contributions 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. Ten (33%) of the sample's books offer strong support for tempered ambition, fourteen (47%) offer moderate support, and six (20%) demonstrate overall opposition.

In advice texts focusing on growing close, dismissals of men's need for success, material gain, and risk taking are more tempered than authors' rejections of hegemonic masculinity's emotional and attitudinal dimensions; even in texts centered around getting laid, celebration of those three facets of traditional masculinity in men's *doing* is more muted than the promotion of masculinity through men's *being*. Authors' reassurances that men can tone down displays of hegemonic masculinity in the realm of doing while still appearing manly are also less forceful in all but the getting laid titles, where tempered ambition is almost entirely opposed. 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 towards 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 (Kimmel 2006b:220), authors recognize that recent welfare state erosion, the neoliberal political climate, and most recently deep economic recession are pulling away the structural support that men need to be the self-made men that epitomize successful masculinity in North America. Consequently, authors promote a more social vision of men's lives, and acknowledge that men's success rests on more than their efforts. Yet, while authors' call for tempered ambition initially seems like a reflection of pressing social and economic factors, I argue that it is in fact a reaction to them: the books suggest that men cannot leave too much of their ambition behind due to economic currents that threaten their masculinity. The authors, however, do not appear to want to deal extensively with the issue of economic currents' threats to masculinity.

The strongest support for tempered ambition comes from authors who caution that the North American fixation on material gain and its equation with successful masculinity is making men sick – emotionally, psychologically, and physically – and pushing both masculinity and the American capitalist system towards a point of acute, mutual crisis. One author names Donald Trump as the poster boy for hegemonic masculinity who exemplifies the “broken American male” trapped by “soulless capitalism” (*The Broken American Male* [2008:47]); he emphasizes fostering self-esteem, a more fulfilling intimate

life, and a much-needed release from the constraints of hegemonic masculinity. Authors are well aware, however, that the cultural push for men to succeed reaches beyond the workplace:

[i]t's not easy to always have to perform and succeed, whether on the athletic field, in the boardroom, or in the bedroom. Although the whole process has been romanticized, the fact is that boys and men often make themselves sick and crazy in getting ready to perform. [*The New Male Sexuality*, 1999:10]

Recognizing that “[m]en want to win, but relationships require a completely different approach” (*The Way to Love Your Wife* [2007:10]), strong proponents of tempered ambition insist that new definitions of success must be based on how much love a man gives and receives, and the health of his intimate and family relationships:

[f]inancial stress can bring out problems that would not have otherwise arisen. Don't compete with others. Let them envy the peace in your home. ... It's better to have a small home that's calm, than a mansion where there's stress. [*Being the Strong Man a Woman Wants*, 2005:99, 101]

Authors who focus on growing close and who offer moderate support for tempered ambition do not speak with the same urgency and fear of crisis about the dangers of hegemonic masculinity's (and North American culture's) fixation on success and material gain, but nonetheless caution against overinvestment in the rat race of North American life:

life 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. ... 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. [*What Makes a Woman Feel Loved?* 2007:39]

Such caution extends to the bedroom, and men are encouraged to rethink “successful” intimate relations by taking “an approach that is pleasure-oriented, not goal-oriented” (*She Comes First* [2004:81]).

In books promoting getting laid, which challenge or fully oppose the strategy of tempered ambition, all emphasize getting laid over growing close; this segment of the sample includes six of the seven books (i.e., 86%) that also offered weak support for relational heroism. Talk of money and possessions figures more prominently here than in the sample's titles centered around growing close. Men are told that wealth is not everything, but that it certainly matters and conveys an image of successful masculinity. At their most critical, getting laid books' rejection of tempered ambition echoes the 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; Edwards 2003; Dizon 2004). The genre's traditional machismo has attracted criticism for its anti-feminism and narcissism (Greer 2000; Edwards 2006), but appears here in a diluted form.

One challenger of tempered ambition advises: “[i]f you have a thick wallet, open it wide...use

some booty to get some bootie!" (*Dr. Z on Scoring* [2008:208-209]). Likewise, this group of authors emphasizes that women – particularly those regarded as most sexually attractive – gravitate towards men who appear "more alpha"; consequently, they suggest honing strategies like "peacocking" (showing off one's social status and dominance in social situations) and advocate that these displays are more effective in attracting women than good looks. In essence, "[i]t's not as much about looks as it is about conveying that you are the 'tribal leader'" (*The Mystery Method* [2007:8]). Material gain and professional reputation are thus constructed as more central to successful masculinity in heterosexual relationships than physical attractiveness and presentation. The same goes for professional accomplishments, so men are encouraged to exaggerate their achievements when getting to know a date (*The Bro Code* [2008:98]). And, while authors do not advocate forms of extreme risk taking that have been equated with hegemonic masculinity – particularly those involving physical risk and violence that figure prominently in sport-centered displays of masculinity (Messner et al. 2001; Cherry 2002; Butryn 2003; Soulliere 2006) – they still champion selective displays of male bravado and the aggressive pursuit of goals, including sexual conquest: "[r]emember: Fortune favors the bold. Do not hold anything back" (*The Guide to Picking Up Girls* [2002:7-8]). While the quest for wealth and power is criticized in books that strongly endorse tempered ambition for its tendency to strain intimate relationships, it is seen as selectively acceptable or advantageous in titles critical of the strategy, particularly those focused on dating and sexual aspects of relationships. Through the strategy, 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

Men's relationship advice books, as prescriptive texts, offer suggestions for how men should do masculinity and understand their role as a partner in heterosexual intimacy; in so doing, they operate as tools of gender socialization and distinction. Further, the books examined here demonstrate a white, middle- or upper-middle class and heterosexist bias (though not a bias that explicitly demeans same-sex relationships) that excludes many men from their target audience. This exclusion thereby puts into question the books' ability to successfully uphold hegemonic forms, and hints at the potential weakness or emptiness of the texts' promises.

Many recent publications, representing the majority in this sample (and potentially the majority within this heterogeneous genre, given the random sample analyzed here), call – to varying extents – for new ways of doing and thinking about masculinity in intimate relationships. They argue that current, hegemonic norms and expectations contribute to emotional and psychological distress that harms men and, by extension, their partners and families. In doing so, these authors employ an overarching strategy of masculinizing intimacy that promotes non-hegemonic behavior, while reframing it to readers as manly. Through the strategy, authors emphasize that their advice lets men break free from the rigid expectations of he-

gemonic masculinity without being construed as wimpy, effeminate, or gay, and express hope that in so doing they have opened up a space for men that lies between the cultural stereotypes of macho man and wimp. Traditionally, men have had to choose between those polarities (Schultz 2000:392), but publications promoting an overarching strategy of masculinizing intimacy invite men to search for a "balance of heart and spine" (*The Way of the Superior Man* [1997]), whether boldly or more reservedly and selectively. Most authors thus speak to the crisis of masculinity with concern – though not always by that name – and consciously attempt to offer authentic alternatives to the "false self" (Horrocks 1994) mandated by hegemonic masculinity. However, this overarching strategy is not uniformly present: a minority of books, namely, those focusing their advice on getting laid as opposed to growing close, reject the strategy and opt to promote constructions of masculinity that align with facets of hegemonic masculinity. It should be noted, given this study's interest in the data's implications for theorizing about hegemony, that the kind of maneuverings revealed through the advice books are predictable within the theory of hegemony (Bates 1975; Hebdige 1979): hegemonies are never static; they always require adaptation to survive, often assimilating what might otherwise threaten to destabilize them.

In growing close books, with their overarching gender strategy of masculinizing intimacy, authors propose two subsidiary strategies – relational heroism and tempered ambition – as means of steering men towards a revised model of intimate relationships. The former, which centers on emotional openness

and moves men away from emotional restraint, is promoted to a greater extent than the latter, which asks men to redefine success in less materialistic terms and tone down competitiveness and risk-taking. On the surface, each subsidiary strategy appears to encourage movement away from hegemonic enactments of masculinity, as characterized in the current North American context by competitiveness, achievement/success, risk-taking, emotional restraint, and courage/toughness (Soulliere 2006); it does so by expanding men's arguably limited range of interpretive repertoires (Gill et al. 2005) and enables the creation and enactment of new compromise formations that attempt to "bridge" ideological dilemmas (Billig et al. 1988) of modern masculinity. To interpretive repertoires, the books' advice proposes new dimensions to heterosexual men's self-understanding, namely, understandings of themselves as partners who can be demonstrative, in tune with their feelings, and confident in their ability to be successful in love and life without compromising their health or integrity. To compromise formations, the books propose ways of bridging conflicting emotions and desires (namely, those between hegemonic and non-hegemonic orientations); these include being the man who earns a respectable living *and* is very involved with his family; being the man who offers his support as a strong, self-assured partner *and* adapts to women's changing roles in public and private life; being the man who sets and strives towards goals in his personal and professional life, but does not do so at the expense of his health or that of his partner. Together, they propose men find a workable middle ground between traditional and emerging ways of doing masculinity in heterosexual relationships, and in so doing they



work towards Cancian's agenda (1986) of moving from an incomplete, "feminized" understanding of love in heterosexual intimacy to a broader, more "androgynous" conceptualization that sees instrumental and affective qualities as central to both men and women's ways of loving. But what, specifically, does masculinity stand to gain from relational heroism in the context of power relations? I argue that advising men to be relational heroes with tempered ambition promises them that they will retain privilege, power, and their hegemonic position by not only assuring men that they will retain their "masculine edge" in doing so but also by suggesting that it will ensure continued rewards (social, economic, sexual) and bolster an image of moral superiority. When carefully considered, though, this appears to be a weak promise.

Another troubling finding is that the growing close books' overarching masculinization strategy also impedes full promotion of Cancian's agenda: their constant reframing of so-called feminine ways of doing intimacy as what "real men" do – and not simply what people in healthy intimate relationships do – still invokes the specter of hegemonic masculinity and signals men's need to police their behavior so it does not come off as wimpy, feminine, or (worst of all) gay. I suggest that the books' masculinization strategy thus exists as an incomplete counter-strategy to the broader cultural feminization of love. More troubling yet, Cancian's agenda – and *any* agenda favoring a broadening and emancipating shift in men's enactments of masculinity – is challenged and undermined by a segment of getting laid books within the sample (and, by extension, a segment of the genre) that

pushes for hegemonic ways of men's being and doing. The finding is particularly concerning given that the oppositional books appear marketed to younger readers, who may represent a growing audience segment for the genre and who may not explore the growing close titles aimed at older men, instead dismissing them as less relevant to their lives and challenges.

At the genre's best, then, its growing close books – by virtue of their masculinization strategy which offers overall promotion of gender equality and interest in men and women's wellbeing – only contributes to what Demetriou (2001) terms a "reconfiguration" of heterosexual masculine intimacy within hegemonic masculinity. A similar process is at play in young men's enactment of heterosexual romance: Allen (2007) and Redman (2001) demonstrate how displays of romantic affection – despite their appearance of offering men a departure from so-called traditional masculinity and hegemonic scripts – still offer men a set of gender beliefs (Ridgeway and Correll 2004) through which they enact heterosexual masculinity in a way that generally reinforces traditional behavior. 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 lead-

ership, competence, and control over their lives. Rogers (2005) also notes a comparable strategy 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 that of growing close books, progressive elements) more so than outright departures from hegemonic masculinity. It also points to the cautious optimism, if not outright concern, with which we should view men's advice books and their potential for promoting gender equality in intimate heterosexual relations, particularly books that challenge counter-hegemonic strategies. While this study has focused on books and

demonstrated the limited extent to which they challenge hegemonic practices surrounding gender, research on media and gender does suggest that challenges to hegemonic practices and representations are more readily presented in other media categories, namely, magazines (Gauntlett 2008; Gill 2008), film and television (Goodwill 2009), and online content (Farr 2011). That said, media categories that we might expect to offer the greatest opportunities for resistance to hegemonic practices and representations – particularly the Internet – often operate as sites of "intense surveillance" where individuals are greatly constrained in their opportunities to defy or speak encouragingly about defiance of gender norms (Bailey et al. 2013). Taken together, this evidence suggests the need to critically encounter media messages about gender and how they appropriate "new" behaviors and characteristics in the service of protecting the powerful.

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## Appendix: Sample of Men's Self-Help Books, 1995-2011.

MANTAK CHIA and DOUGLAS ABRAMS (1996): *The*

*Multi-Orgasmic Man: Sexual Secrets Every Man Should Know*

LAURA SCHLESSINGER (1997): *Ten Stupid Things Men Do to Mess Up Their Lives*

DAVID DEIDA (1997): *The Way of the Superior Man*

BERNIE ZILBERGELD (1999): *The New Male Sexuality, Revised Edition*

LOU PAGET (2000): *How to Give Her Absolute Pleasure*

GABE FISCHBARG (2002): *The Guide to Picking Up Girls*

Team of 11 authors (2003): *Esquire's The Rules: A Man's Guide to Life*

PETER POST (2003): *Essential Manners for Men*

MICHAEL CASTLEMAN (2004): *Great Sex*

IAN KERNER (2004): *She Comes First*

CLIFFORD and JOYCE PENNER (2004): *The Married Guy's Guide to Great Sex*

DAVID WEXLER (2004): *When Good Men Behave Badly*

ELLIOTT KATZ (2005): *Being the Strong Man a Woman Wants*

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

EVE SALINGER (2005): *The Complete Idiot's Guide to Pleasing Your Woman*

NEIL STRAUSS (2005): *The Game*

MARCY MICHAELS (2005): *The Lowdown on Going Down*

LES PARROTT and LESLIE PARROTT (2006): *Your Time Starved Marriage Workbook for Men*

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

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

CHARLOTTE KANE (2007): *Sex Machine*

MICHAEL ANTONIO (2007): *The Excusive Layguide*

MYSTERY (2007): *The Mystery Method*

CLIFFORD and JOYCE PENNER (2007): *The Way to Love Your Wife*

EMILIE BARNES (2007): *What Makes a Woman Feel Loved?*

VICTORIA ZDROK (2008): *Dr. Z on Scoring*

BARNEY STINSON (2008): *The Bro Code*

SHMULEY BOTEACH (2008): *The Broken American Male and How To Fix Him*

NEIL STRAUSS (2009): *Rules of the Game*

CHRISTOPHER GRAY (2011): *From Shy to Social: The Shy Man's Guide to Personal and Dating Success*

Knudson, Sarah. 2014. „Getting Laid and Growing Close: Constructions of Masculinity in Relationship Advice for Heterosexual Men." *Qualitative Sociology Review* 10(3):116-137. Retrieved Month, Year ([http://www.qualitativesociologyreview.org/ENG/archive\\_eng.php](http://www.qualitativesociologyreview.org/ENG/archive_eng.php)).